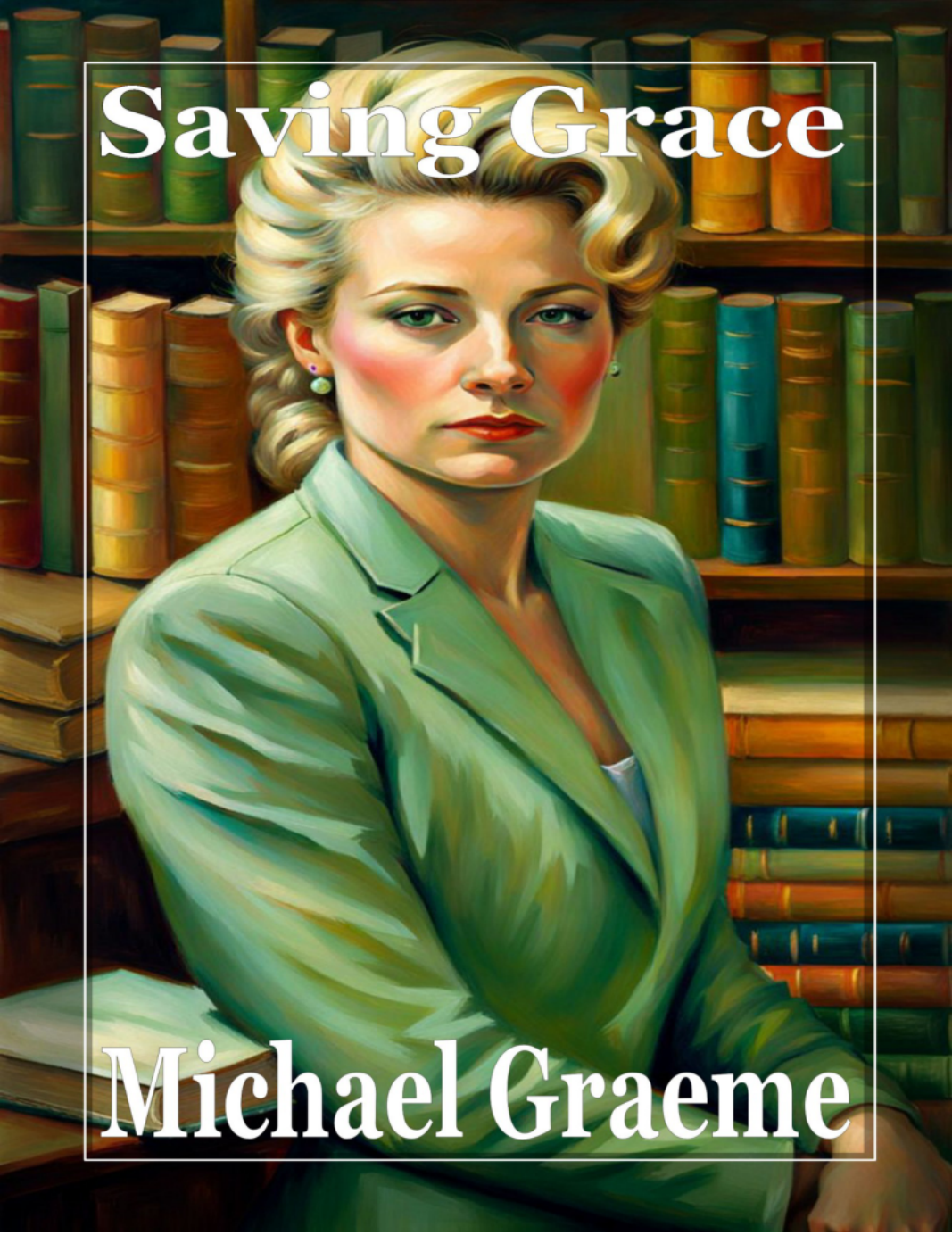
Saving Grace
Michael Graeme

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by

Michael Graeme

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Chapter One

I'm not imagining it, am I? I mean, how we used to dress up for shopping in town on Saturday afternoons. Dad would wear a clean shirt and tie, Mum a nice dress and lipstick. And it wasn't a class thing. My parents were poor.

I've seen a hundred movie actresses from Hollywood's Golden Era on Main Street: Marilyn Monroe, Rita Hayworth, Lauren Bacall, or so it seemed to me as a kid, those fine ladies all clickety clacking in their long heels and their big, shiny hair. They weren't rich either, just your regular mill-girls all done up and dignified and proud. This would have been in the sixties, I suppose, maybe the early seventies.

Rose tinted vision perhaps? Sure, I get that, but there's no denying it's different now. I look out of the window of this little bookshop and I see a people – pretty much all of them – dishevelled, crushed, some even a little drunk, though it's just past lunch.

There are no movie stars on Main Street any more. Our role models offer no magic, no escape, only this same insufferable grunge, and all the time our noses rubbed in it and a cynical voice-over telling us things will never get any better than this.

Me? I still pretend. I've been doing it all my life.

Right now I'm pretending to be this bookish, tweedy hipster – Chinos, casual jacket, button-down Oxford shirt, and shiny brogues. I'm Hugh Grant in Notting Hill, or for those of you a little older, I'm Anthony Hopkins in Charing Cross Road. Either way it's an act. I'm not doing it because I'm expecting Julia Roberts or Anne Bancroft to drop in any time soon. It just gets me out of bed in the morning, and it's somewhere warm to sit without using up the Calor in the van.

A slow stagger of drunks has spilled out of the pub up the top of Chapel Street, what the Council's recently taken to calling the 'Northern Quarter'. It makes it sound like a chic Parisian hot-spot, but the pub – the Malting House they call it now – is the same seedy old ale-house it always was, cheap booze, sticky carpets and vomit on the step – a questionable choice for continuity with a bygone era. I'd rather we'd hung on to Woolworth's – always something cosy about Woollies – but the Malting House is chosen as ambassador to our past, our present, and it seems now also our future.

The drunks are shouting – all of them women, tight dresses, boobs spilling out, fag-raw voices. They sound aggressive, like they're spoiling for a fight, but as I listen, I realise they're only having a conversation, something about meeting up again, tomorrow.

'Yea right then, see yer love,'

'See yer...'

'See yer...'

It's a simple enough exchange, but it takes a while and they swear a lot while struggling to light up, drawing comically sideways on their cigarettes. Not pretty, is it? Is this really what we have become, we plucky Brits? We ninety nine percenters?

There's a 'bigger shoe' guy pacing out his pitch, the same small square of street, hour after hour, his plaintive call the sound-track to my days. It's a new guy, late middle age, pockmarked face, his boredom lifted only by the occasional passing abuse on account of his foreignness. I don't know his story, but picture him as one of those escaping by a hair's breadth the mess we've made of the world, while those who stirred up the mess don't have to look him in the eye all the time like I do. I reckon he makes a tenner a day for his trouble, if he's lucky. I've yet to a buy a magazine from him. In truth I'm embarrassed to be even slightly better off.

Luck, these days, is marginal and relative.

Opposite, in the doorway of the empty shop, there's been a homeless person these past few weeks. There's a couple of them up by the church too, and one on the carpark now. The person opposite is shapeless in a dozen layers, feet and legs immersed in a sleeping bag that's bursting stuffing from one corner. I can't tell if it's a man or a woman. You always get a lot of rough sleepers in the cities, but it's spreading into the provincial market towns now, and each one a canary dropping from its perch in warning.

'The dog starved at its master's gate,' and all that. *Blake (1803)*

Odd still to be quoting Blake. It's like we've learned nothing in two hundred years. Indeed if anything we're evolving backwards into a darker, crueller age even than the one he knew. Or maybe it's true what they say about history – that all it teaches us is we never learn from history.

Maggs emerges from the back room, whiff of perfume – Le Jardin, I think. I had a girl who was fond of that, but don't remind me.

"Just off then, Mike."

"Righto Maggs. See you later."

She's wearing the green dress today. Suits it. I presume it's fitted. She's rather pear shaped, chunky in the thigh, but the dress makes a virtue of it. Snug jeans wouldn't be her thing at all. Apologies for the crass objectification, but she's a difficult one to know, therefore gives me little choice, and it's been a slow day in the bookshop.

"Be nice to have lunch together sometime," she says. "I mean, if we can ever get Alan to turn up when he should, then he can take over for a bit. What do you say?"

"Yes, Maggs. That would be lovely."

I'm not sure if it would be lovely. Actually, I'd probably find it awkward, I mean socialising with Maggs. And not altogether proper.

"Sure you're all right minding the shop?"

"No problem. Sandwich in my bag."

Minding the shop, is, after all, what I'm here to do.

Notice I didn't say 'paid'.

"Okay, so... see you later then."

And she's off, usually for coffee and a panini in the Market Cafe. There's not much by way of haute cuisine in Middleton. Never has been – simply not that sort of town any more, and therein, I suppose, lies much of its virtue.

I don't know much about Maggs – she's the boss, and that's about it. She's married, judging by the rings – full house: engagement, wedding and an ostentatious eternity which suggests a certain longer term stability, if somewhat overstated. I suspect she has no children, because there's nothing more women like boring you with than the endless insignificant achievements of their offspring, and she's never mentioned any.

Apologies again.

It must, actually, be quite nice to have children. Mine would be grown up by now of course, lives of their own. A positive achievement, to have created life, but also rather a knife to one's throat to then see it suffer making way in the world, such as the world is now.

She likes long heels, I note. Invented by a man, presumably, in order to create that accentuated roll of the hips, which is pleasing to the eye, but very much out of place in Middleton these days. And what with her hair, wound up tight like Tippi Hedren in Marnie... she stands out more than I'd be comfortable doing in a town like this.

The drunk women are still taking leave of one another; they cast her a sideways glance as she wafts by.

"Who does she think she is then?"

They don't actually say it out loud, but I was a good salesman in my day, which involves a lot of mind-reading, and I know they're thinking it.

I watch as she clacks away and the crowds fold over her. Such an attractive down in the nape of her neck, I've noticed. Yes, Maggs still has the movie-star quality, at least she would have, back in the day when hips were the thing.

A coin is dropped into the homeless person's hat. There's a myth, perpetuated by those aspiring to the one percenters, and their various foetid press orifi that beggars go home each night to nice houses. But truth is not the same as belief, and we should be careful what we are led to believe, also mindful of who it is that's leading us.

I think on this for a moment, take out my notebook and jot down the observation. It's not especially profound, quite obvious really, but small things are important these days.

Truth and belief.

I resolve to meditate upon it.

Chapter Two

I can't remember what that shop used to be – the one in whose doorway the homeless person sits all day. It was a tobacconist, I think. It's been empty for a while, business rents so high they're driving out respectability, driving it all the way out to the Yankee style malls that are nibbling into the green belt. The only places that thrive in Middleton now are thrift shops because they get a special rate. Coffee shops also do well, so long as they don't get too far up themselves, in which case they never last more than five minutes. Then there are the usual parasites that feed upon poverty: the betting shops, the pawn shops... and the pubs.

My bookshop was a shoe-shop. Mum used to bring me here for my little Startrites. I say, "bookshop", but the town's not had a proper bookshop, other than Smiths in thirty years, and Smiths moved out last winter. It's just another charity shop, really – old books. After twenty five years travelling in aluminium castings, I work here now. Well... actually, I volunteer. Pushing sixty, and with no recognisable qualifications as such, I'm basically unemployable, and have to give my time away, unless I'd rather waste the days in bed.

Maggs has a degree in something or other, I forget what. She gets paid of course, but I'd hazard a guess it's not much, because if you're an employee, it never is. Owners are different, but that’s a special club and generally only psychopaths are eligible. She's not in Middleton all the time, just a couple of days a week, comes to collect the takings, such as they are, checks the stock, redistributes the surplus among the other bookshops in the region she manages.

She thinks I'm a bit thick, I suppose, guy my age, bit of a dinosaur, never seen a computer before. Sometimes though, it's to one's advantage to act a bit numb. It opens more doors than one would imagine, and keeps closed the doors one definitely doesn't want opening. At least not any more I don't.

There are three others on the roster. We're supposed to do days about, but you can't expect reliability when you're not paying anything. Maggs has me on her little iPhone and I'm called out more days than not. She's never one for conversation, keeps it clipped, business like:

"Mike, can you come in this morning? Robbie's sick again."

Robbie's sick a lot. But then he's seventy five and struggles with arthritis. Lindsay struggles too, but that's with alcohol. Alan struggles with his nerves,

and while we all do our best, none of us are going to get any better. As for Maggs, there's never a "sorry" for ringing me at seven a.m. on my days off. No 'thank you' when I say I'll come in. But I always do. Come in, I mean and you can make of this what you will, but if you're turning up at eight thirty, regular as clockwork more days than not to sit behind this desk for no pay, you either like books, or you've got something wrong with you.

I guess that's me on both counts.

Anyway there's a guy just brought in a shopping bag of books, dumped them on the desk without a word, then hurried out again. You get all sorts. Sometimes they expect a medal for their generosity, sometimes it's just a chat and I'm happy to oblige, because our phones are killing off the art of conversation. Embarrassment, that's his problem, and common enough – embarrassed to admit he's a reader maybe, somehow bookish in this god-forsaken age.

Poor sod.

You and me both, mate.

"Thanks. Very kind of you."

There are eight books in the bag. Six generic chick-lit titles – always the best movers, and we can't really get enough of them. Women are by far the most prolific readers. The other two are more literary. One of them's Barry's 'Long Long Way'. I'll read that one myself before it goes out on the shelf – call it perks of the job. They'd cost getting on for a tenner, new. We sell them for couple of quid, buy one get one free. That's the commercial, by the way – Donnegans on Chapel Street, Middleton. Call next time you're passing. All donations to a good cause – though I forget now what that cause is exactly, other than, in part, Maggs' wages, and her boss', I suppose.

Anyway, I take the books into the back room, give them a wipe with a cloth and just a hint of Mr Muscle – nothing worse than a grubby book cover, is there? Much more attractive when they're squeaky clean. Maggs has left a couple of titles by Dylan Thomas on the table. I'd forgotten about those. They're not in great condition, much thumbed and scribbled in by generations of lit students. No doubt she's thinking of binning them.

Indeed, she'd be happier if we cleared out the little poetry section altogether, made way for more celebrity biography. I tell her it's the poetry that marks us out as different, makes us like a proper bookshop. And we still shift a few copies, though she doesn't know it's me who's bought most of them. So far as

I'm concerned if the poetry dies in Middleton, we might as well all of us pile into the Malting House and drink ourselves to an early death.

Consider it my little gesture of defiance in the face of Austerity, something quietly subversive about it.

So... Dylan Thomas goes on the shelf – Miscellany One (1963) and Two (1974). There was also a Miscellanies Three, I recall, 1978 or so. It would be nice to have all three, but there we go. I've dipped into each of them over the years, was moved by them, but mystified and downright stumped as well.

'Do not go gentle into that good night... rage, rage..."

And so on.

Miscellany One, I think.

But that's all well and good, Dylan, my lad, except when your time's up, it's up, and ranting on about it's, well, a bit undignified, I mean when there's not a damned thing you can do. Me? I'd rather just settle down in an easy chair, put on some music or cycle through old movies.

Bring it on, I say – I'll go quietly, thanks.

It's raining hard of a sudden. The homeless person disappears inside the sleeping bag, resembles a giant caterpillar now, curled up there. God help them, it must be five degrees outside, and a frost this morning. I wonder where they sleep. Is there a hostel in town these days? I don't know. I've heard they're bad places – all violence and drugs and bed-bugs.

Do the Salvation Army take soup round of a night?

In Middleton?

Whatever have we come to?

The bigger shoe man puts up a busted golfing brolly, gamely tanks it out for his tenner a day. I imagine he's seen worse than a bit of rain – was pulled from the sea perhaps, family drowned, his home blown to bits in a war no one seems able to stop, and hardly makes the BBC any more. I may be wide of the mark, but this is the story I make up for him.

I digress. I've no idea. No idea at all.

Business as usual then.

I straighten my cuffs, take out the notebook, jot down my observations, my notes... from a small bookshop.

Good title Mike!

Chapter Three

My Aunt's house was built in 1909, rather a noble looking double fronted villa, and I guess quite posh for its day. It lasted until the first shudder following the trial fracking they carried out some years ago and was thereafter pronounced a danger to life and limb by the surveyor.

The fracking company say the quake was natural, and all manner of experts back them up, so compensation was not forthcoming. Unfortunately I then discovered my Aunt hadn't paid insurance on the place in years, so I moved her into a nursing home while we worked out what to do. She solved the problem for herself by promptly dying there, rather a confused and ultimately homeless old lady. The ruin of the property, such as it was, then passed to me.

I got as far as having it cleared with a JCB, while I slept in a caravan in the garden, sold my own place and invested the money. The garage was still serviceable so I left that standing – somewhere to keep Mavis dry of a night – she being rather an old and, to me at least, quite a precious little Japanese roadster – though in money terms I guess she's barely worth a thousand pounds.

I'd planned to replace the ruin with one of those stylish Huff Houses. I got planning permission and everything, even had the foundations prepared, but then they shut the foundry and I got potted. The money I'd made from the sale of my own place was pressed instead into providing a modest income to boost the rather meagre company pension, taken about a decade early, and as a consequence I'm still in the van.

It's a biggish plot, nice lawns and well planted, a little shed for the mower and tools and such, and then there's this odd shaped concrete raft of course where the house used to be, and the garage to one side. It confused the postman no end until I put a postbox out front. It's all a little weedy now, and the Bamboo my aunt had a penchant for is becoming rampant. Soon it'll resemble the Bamboo Grove in Hesse's Glass Bead Game (1948), minus the sage of course, since I hardly qualify.

But then it doesn't take a sage to work out a caravan's no place to be in the middle of winter – either too hot when the heater's on, or too cold when it's not, and the mould makes short work of anything made of leather – namely shoes at a hundred quid a pair all furred up after the first six months. And I imagine the damp plays havoc with what I take to be the beginnings of rheumatic pains in my joints.

I'm making it sound grimmer than it is of course. On the plus side it's a rural location, views up to the West Pennines, and the van's a nice, big old thing, turfed off a holiday site in the Lakes for being past its sell-by. But it's in good repair and comfy enough for a single chap with no aspirations, and even fewer prospects.

I have a solar panel system to cut back on the mains, and I've started using a wood burner instead of the Calor – touring the villages around about in the summer, looking for skips and clearances – a lot of wood just gets thrown away, you see? You've got to be sharp in spotting it though because it's a competitive business in these straigtened times, blagging free heat. I suppose there'll come a time when it'll be outlawed, but until then I'm managing to have sufficient scrap sawn up and stacked by autumn to see me through the winter.

Off grid as much as possible – that's the way!

Alone? Yes, pretty much these days. Never married, both parents gone and no family. It's a lonely life, but I'm used to that, spending a lot of time on the road with the job, living inside my own head. The benefit is the freedom it affords one, and I'm in no position now to be supporting a partner anyway. I wake at nights on occasion, thinking it would be nice again to have someone to share a bed with, snuggle up to, buy flowers for, spoil rotten etc, but experience has taught me such luxuries come with a heavy price tag, and I'm not just talking about money.

Casual one nighters are an option, but have never really been my thing, even when I was on the road. Plus they're harder to find, and increasingly ridiculous the older one gets. Also, I suppose I've reached that age where the women I find attractive are far too young to be second glancing me, and the women of my own age are either long spoken for, or, let's face it, in the main, physically running to seed. Also I've observed single women of my age, widowed or otherwise, are generally in search of husbands, not lovers.

"Mike? Robbie's having a bad day. He needs to go home. Will you come in?"

Maggs.

It's half past nine on a Saturday morning, and the forecast is good. I'm thinking about eggs and bacon at Morrison's Cafe, then a run over to the Dales with Mavis for a walk. They do a good breakfast at Morrisons.

"Lindsay?" I suggest, half heartedly, knowing how unlikely it is that we can

rely upon Lindsay, poor kid.

"Can't get her to answer the 'phone."

Alcohol's a devil when it gets hold of you – bad as anything illegal, but they sell it cheaper than water. Clearly we need more people on the volunteering roster.

"Alan?"

"Not answering either."

There's no please, no persuasive sweetness in her tone. It's a straight yes or no she's after. Very business-like... very... I don't know,... pragmatic, is our Maggs.

"I'll be there in an hour. Can you hold the fort 'till then?"

"I suppose I'll have to."

No, the hour's wait doesn't please her much – something in her tone before she closes the call. I can be there in fifteen minutes if I drop everything, but I want to wash and change – no sense in sacrificing appearances – so an hour it is.

No gratitude either. You notice that?

Presence! We've lost this idea of taking the time to anchor oneself in the present moment. That sounds a little odd, I know. But when we rush into everything we lose touch with our selves and our presence in the world. Which is why I stop, and take time to fasten in a pair of cuff links. It's not just for fancy. It's for ourselves, and we should never be ashamed of that.

Anyway, she's a good looking woman, Maggs – well kept, you might say – fortyish, unhappy in some way, and that intrigues me. Can't say for sure how I know, other than at times there's something rather stiff about that mask she wears.

We all deal with life through a set of programmed responses. We can't help it. It's interesting when you become aware of it, that we're all simply automatons, play-acting in some way. I'm the same of course, but it's one thing to know you're pretending you're something you're not, quite another inflating yourself into something bigger than you really are and actually believing in it. That could be Magg's problem. She's not cottoned on to even that most basic of truths yet.

Or at least this is the story I've written for her.

These are just small lives we're living, you understand? Provincial market town lives, about a hundred thousand souls hereabouts, mostly unknown to one another, let alone to the billions of others alive in the world today. The best of them try to make a difference, try to make the world a little more comfortable for others, rather than just themselves. There's a belief nowadays small lives like ours aren't worth a damn, but I have a theory the important things are easier to spot in places like this, even if they're only conspicuous by their absence.

Anyway.

I arrive at the shop, but instead of taking off, Maggs sits herself down like lady muck on the sofa, smooths her dress down like she's settling in for a while, and starts to read – still no word of thanks either. She's working her way through the entire canon of Ian McEwan at the moment – On Chesil Beach (2007) this morning. She has a slightly disapproving look about her while she does so.

I've always thought of McEwan as more of a man's writer, which perhaps explains it – her look being more one of bemusement at the appraisal of an unknown and slightly puzzling species. I fear I also have her down as a militant feminist, result of long years attached to the wrong man. And since I don't know Maggs, or her man, I've no idea where these ideas come from, and therefore perhaps reveal more about myself than anyone else.

The sofas were my idea by the way.

They got chucked into a skip when they were clearing out the hairdressers next door. Robbie and I brought them in – Robbie on a good day. Maggs wasn't sure, wrinkled her nose, didn't want loafers sitting down and reading stuff for free, then walking out without buying anything.

It's all about maximising your retail space – I understand that – and these sofas do take up a lot of room, whilst apparently contributing nothing but comfort. But takings did go up a little afterwards, so Maggs was happy to let them stay, and they do add immeasurably to the old book-shop vibe, which is a deceit I'm rather happy to indulge.

The bigger shoe man's on his pitch, the homeless person's in their doorway and there's some kid with a banjo doing a not half bad impression of George Formby. Saturdays are marginally less depressing in Middleton on account of

the buskers, even the rubbish ones.

A dishevelled professor-type comes in and asks if I'll order him some obscure title. I explain, politely, we're a charity book-shop, and don't do that sort of thing, but I find it difficult to make myself understood. Has he tried online? No he hasn't. The online world has entirely passed him by. I turn to the computer, and look the title up for him on Ebay.

Lo and behold, there's a copy for thirty quid, hardback. 'Buy it now.' I tell him if he'll give me thirty quid, plus a two pound transaction fee, I'll order it for him, and it'll be in in about a week. He's appalled, mutters dark curses and shuffles away.

Bookshops attract all sorts, mostly the stranger varieties of humankind.

Maggs is smiling, now. Something amuses her.

"That was quick thinking, Mike."

Ah... mistake. I don't want her thinking I can think quickly.

Blue dress today, nice little jacket. Hair long and loose for a change which makes her look about thirty five. Scent of Le Jardin.

Don't remind me.

And then, looking over the top of her book: "Heavens, it's just a girl!"

"What's that, Maggs?"

"I've been trying to catch a glimpse all morning. It's a girl, Mike. Look."

The homeless person has emerged from their layers just long enough to reveal the shape of a face. It's younger than I'd first thought, but whether male or female I still could not decide. Long haired young men, after all, do not look dissimilar to young girls. The absence of a beard did rather suggest, however... I defer to the boss's analysis and allow that it might indeed be a girl.

"That's a shame, Maggs."

"Oh... but can't somebody do something? It's not right..."

Now this strikes me as being a little sexist – the implication that a homeless

man could freeze his balls off out there all year, yet solicit not so much as a flutter of sympathy, while Maggs' reaction suggests the fairer sex are considered the more human for being worthy of instant compassion. Don't get me wrong I am quite moved by the revelation myself but surely it's an equal tragedy, whether it's a man or a woman?

"I wouldn't worry. She probably has a snazzy little motor parked somewhere across town, and a three bedroom detached to go home to."

Maggs shoots me a dark look. "You don't actually believe all that rubbish, do you?"

This hits the spot and I'm ashamed of my feeble attempt at humour. "Sorry, Maggs. Of course not. That must be why she hides herself though."

"How do you mean?"

"Well, young girl on the street, they're so much more... vulnerable to the unscrupulous element, aren't they."

It appears I have just answered my own question. Maggs thinks on this for a while, is disturbed by it, which was not my intention. She sets her book aside, looks rather stern.

The shop becomes busier of a sudden.

Saturday afternoons are when we do most trade. Maggs doesn't usually stick around, and I'd thought the whole point of my coming in was so she didn't have to – having already put in her required hours for that week. But still she lingers which is frustrating, and I rather have the impression she's checking up on me, like there's something wrong with my work or my attitude to customers, that sort of thing. Ridiculous really. It's not like I'm being paid, but the shop means so much more than that to me now and I would not like to lose even my unpaid position within it.

I think it was Orwell who wrote that most of those drawn to bookshops tend to be of the paranoid type.

It seems I am no exception.

Anyway, we've just had this generous donation of the complete set of the Brother Cadfael mysteries – Ellis Peters. It makes sense to keep them together, but this requires some shuffling of stock to make room on the shelf. I'm there for a while, my back to the shop, but when I've finished I turn

around and that's when I see her.

No, not Maggs.

Someone else.

I see long brown hair, expensive jeans, a cream camisole and, over that, a beautiful blouse in shimmering shades of green. She's loose of limb and crouched down in the literary section, such an elegance in her poise, an arm reaching out lazily, index finger raised to guide her gaze as she scans the titles.

My first impression is that she must be some kind of alien, or lost, to find herself in Middleton in a charity bookshop, among the dishevelled and the crushed and the homeless. She's simply too elegant, too beautiful to be here at all.

No... I mean really!

I freeze, still a couple of Cadfaels in my hand. The feeling is almost spiritual. I am completely entranced by this woman, and lose all track of time. She's simply stunning, and what I'm feeling as I look at her is a dull ache, something sweet yet ultimately... sad.

Sad?

Well, all right... more regret then. Yes, that's it. It's like staring into an awful yawing chasm of dreams of things that could never be.

But whatever those things are or were – and I really don't know – I'm completely overwhelmed by an inarticulate longing for them. Not for *her* you understand? For *them* – for the sweet thing or things she embodies.

"Mike?"

Maggs' voice brings me back to myself, she takes the books from my hand, slots them into place, rather a supercilious smirk on her lips – at least I imagine so. I've no idea how long I've been standing there. I blush,...

"Hmm? Sorry Maggs."

No. This isn't what you think. After all, there's no point being struck by love at first sight when you're too old to do anything about it, is there? I'm rather

hoping there's something about the woman to stall this unfortunate and rather sudden rush of tender sympathies before they get a head start on me. If she would only turn and reveal some flaw, some imperfection...

She does turn, but she's rather good-looking actually, so there is no easy get out to be had. She is Marilyn Monroe, she is Rita Hayworth, she is Julia Roberts, all in one and she smiles at me directly, a full megawatt smile. Then she approaches, so I feel the panic rising as in the breast of the humblest serf at the approach of his queen.

"How much for these, Mike?" she asks. She's holding Dylan's Miscellanies. She likes poetry? But this is incredible! This is almost like... fate.

But wait... she knows my name?

Only because Maggs has just used it, you dummy.

Maggs has to answer for me. I'm still speechless. Stricken. Such a beautiful smile, and her voice, soft, lilting... delicate.

She has such... grace!

But more than that I much of that sadness I realise is not so much mine… as hers. Those dreams of things that cannot be… are hers. Or so the story I am writing for her goes.

She pays with a shiny two pound coin, slips the books into her shoulder-bag, thanks Maggs, and walks out. I get a backwards glance that could be explained by a romantic curiosity or, as is more likely, mirth at my stupidity. I manage to silently mouth the word: "Bye," but that's about it.

"Mike? Are you all right? You look a bit queer. Why don't you go out and have a cup of tea. I'll cover for a bit."

There's something disapproving in her tone, as if I've disappointed her, been unprofessional, and she'd rather I was out of her sight now. Yes, I know I'm probably imagining it, but I need no further persuasion, take up my jacket, go out into the street, compelled to see where this exotic creature has gone. But the Saturday crowds have folded over all trace, leaving me wondering if I imagined her.

Just as well.

I return after half an hour of wandering the precinct, visiting all the places I

can think of where a woman like that might have gone. Bodycare? Boots? that new fancy goods shop on Mill Street – the one that won't last five minutes in a town like this? She's nowhere, and I feel her loss in a sudden heaviness. Meanwhile, in the till, the shiny two pound coin she left stands out amongst its less lustrous brethren. I replace it with a couple of scabby pounds of my own, and slip the pristine coin she held into my breast pocket, feel its weight settling there. Something mysterious about it.

Hell! I really thought I'd done with all of that.

Chapter Four

There was a girl in High Wycombe, another in Middleton – both at the same time, I'm afraid to say. But they were two hundred and fifty miles apart and these were the pre-internet, pre-social media days, so there was little chance of them ever finding out about one another. I know that doesn't make it any easier to forgive, but there we are.

It would have been in the very early nineties, I suppose. I'd moved away from the technical office at the foundry by then, joined the sales team. The money was better, and they gave me a BMW. I rather fancied the travelling life for a bit. Most of our customers were in the south, so that's where I spent a good deal of my time. They were both lovely, lively girls, good looking, great fun.

Of the two, Laura, my High Wycombe girl, was the more exciting in bed. She taught me most of what I know about the carnal life, and the erotic – the erotic of course being something quite beyond mere sex. Sandra, my Middleton lass was all the sweeter for her innocence. Laura was my weekday girl, Sandra my weekends. Laura was Le Jardin, Sandra was... what was she? Clinique, I think, at least by day, but for our evening trysts I remember something of a deeper, darker bouquet.

I was five years with Laura, six with Sandra. It ended on both counts, not because either found out about the other, but more I believe it was simply in the way of things. There is a natural transition from the initial attraction, to the novelty of a fresh skin, then the comfort and security of its familiarity, then the seeds of imperfection, the bad moods, and finally guilt at not becoming for them what either of them wanted me to be, which I suppose was engaged to be married. And of course they wanted babies, because that's ultimately what all women want from men, just like all men want from women, more or less is... well, pussy.

No offence.

Neither of us can help these things.

Thinking back, either girl would have been delightful as a life-mate, but there was something in me then that resisted commitment. And now it's rather too late. I also felt terribly guilty about the whole thing afterwards, and somehow unworthy of Womankind. Yet it seems the Wellbeloved persists in me and, I presume, for a reason other than self mockery.

The Wellbeloved?

Yes… it's an unfamiliar concept these days – I'll explain later.

Anyway, what I felt that time in the bookshop was not the first time it had happened, a part of me still clearly desiring women in the normal way, while the greater, more sensible part of me points out their shortcomings, to wit for starts in this most recent case: I was old enough to be her father – not that such a thing would have deterred a one percenter. But they have evolved into a breed apart, seem at times quite amoral, and otherwise psychologically confused. Well-adjusted late-middle-aged men do not seek truly romantic relations with girls in their twenties.

Manners, etiquette, sexual politics and morality, such subtleties are left to the rest of us to make what we can of them while the one percenters squander their privilege in sordid excess. I know... this sounds a bit rich coming from a man who once juggled two girls, but even I recognise it's more than the mere objective fact of a woman that's the important thing, that a man gains most in this respect from a woman of similar years to himself.

Pussy notwithstanding.

Thinking back I must have appeared quite gormless to her, perhaps even a little simple. That girl in the shop, I mean. But what was most shocking to me was the sudden and quite overwhelming feeling my life up to that point had amounted to nothing. In purely material terms it hadn't of course, but I'd always managed to be quite sanguine about it. Now though, I felt bitter, and ached for something else, was hungry for a kind of satisfaction I'd craved as a younger man, the only salve for which, beyond sex, was to be wanted, to be included, swept up under the wing of one so beautiful, so elegant, so graceful as she.

This is the message of the muse: "Shape yourself Mike".

The shock of it was for a time quite paralysing. But from past experience I was confident that, over the coming days, the feeling would evolve into something more philosophical. To assist in matters I made it clear to Maggs I would not be available for duty, and took myself off with Mavis to the Yorkshire Dales. I was thinking some time away would put me straight.

It usually does.

So...

Mavis is perhaps my only enduring love. All other things are transient. Except, of course, she too is rather showing her age; she's getting on in years now, still a lively little machine, and has yet to let me down, though she's clocked well over a hundred thousand. But the last MOT revealed the beginnings of tin worm, bubbling and flaking around the rear of the sills and the arches – a common defect of this marque. It causes the MOT man to suck his teeth and declare the vehicle unroadworthy – and welding is so expensive. I could buy a newer car for the cost of repair, which is the sensible thing to do, I suppose. So it looked like being our last year together, but the thought of it, coupled with my more recent and rather unfortunate infatuation lent an air of unsettled melancholy to the trip. It did not bode well and rather spoke to a deeper malaise that puzzled me.

There was clearly more to this affair than I realised.

There's this cabin I rent by the River Wharfe, a little way downstream from Burnsall. It's rather a peculiar spot, a secret place washed by the constant sound of the river, and nestling deep in a bowl of hills. There is something womb-like about it, a long, narrow umbilical of rutted track connecting it to an insignificant and dead ended strip of road that wends for miles. It focuses the mind like no other place I know, if perhaps only because there is no Internet, nor TV nor mobile coverage.

There is solar lighting, and a wood-burning stove, like at the van. Unlike the van though this place is built to Scandinavian standards and will remain cosy when it is minus twenty outside. It also has stairs, and I rather like sleeping upstairs. There is something primeval in climbing one's way to bed – a perfect solution to the scourge of sabre toothed tigers. As for the rest, there are sheepskin throws and deep leather sofas, and sweet scented pine boards. And there are walls and walls of books.

It is a deceit of course, this sense of remoteness – clean bedding and materials are brought in by the farmer's lady on a trailer hitched to a doggedly assertive little quad-bike, and the market town of Grassington is not twenty minutes away.

I'm here for the week, but find myself feeling hollow and alone the whole time. I eat little, just nibble inconsequentially at things. And I walk.

I cannot be in love – the idea is ridiculous – but I am certainly fretting over something.

By midweek, I have ventured over to Horton and climbed the shapely prow of Penyghent. I am using the phone as a navigational aid, when it rings and I

almost drop it in a puddle. It's Maggs, asking if I can come in.

Dammit.

"I'm in the Dales, Maggs. Remember?"

"Oh. I'd forgotten, Mike."

I wonder how much notice she takes of anything I tell her.

"Tomorrow will do," she says.

I am on the summit by this time, two and a half thousand feet up, wind howling, miles from the nearest road. I fancy other hikers are sneering at me for my use of a phone in the wilds, and normally I would have been cross but discover I am actually rather glad to hear her voice – her somewhat terse telephone manner notwithstanding. It cuts cleans through my loneliness, reminds me that what I most enjoy these days is my time in the bookshop, and the odd bit of casual chat with the customers. Still, there's nothing I can do about that now.

"Sorry Maggs, I'm booked in for the week."

"Oh... really?" She sounds disappointed, confused, but I did explain all of this to her. I think of suggesting Robbie or Alan, but think again. "Well, you enjoy yourself, Mike. And stay safe, won't you?"

She sounds distant now, a little lost, and I do regret that, am mystified both by it and by my regret, but she will just have to fill in herself, or get someone else in the organisation or whatever shambles it is that's fronted by Donnegans to do so. Surely the whole lot of it can't come crashing down for want of one unpaid volunteer, can it?

The weather settles in wet. I return to the cabin and I don't venture from it for the rest of the week. The clouds come down the hillsides forming a cap on the Dale and the river takes on a more deep throated murmuring. No sense now in fighting such days in full waterproofs, blundering my way through the murk across the tops. I take my cue from the land and hunker down instead to watch the river through the picture window that lets onto the now rain varnished deck. The river runs black and viscous, like oil.

I find Hardy's Wellbeloved (1897) on the shelves. It's an unusual find, but apposite since I was talking about it to you earlier on wasn’t I? It's one of the more mysterious of his novels, also one of his last. In it, our nineteenth

century hero, a sculptor, falls for the "form" of a woman manifested through three generations of one family: Mother, daughter and finally the granddaughter.

Hardy does not mean this literally, of course, that as an old man the sculptor lusts after the granddaughter having first lusted after her mother in his middle age and her grandmother in his youth. Taken literally like that it is rather a silly story, to say nothing of being somewhat perverted. No, what he is chasing in each woman is his ideal, his evergreen muse, in the same way I am chasing it through the unnamed woman in the bookshop. The muse does not change, you see? She does not age as a man ages. She is timeless, immortal. She is of the Gods.

This is what Hardy is telling us.

I think of Laura – heavens – nearly thirty years ago now: big hair, blow waves, shoulder pads and high-gloss lipstick, and I feel nostalgic for those times. I have not seen her since, but were I to see her now as a middle aged lady, the muse would surely have deserted her. The muse is not about love and procreation you see? The muse is guiding a man to something else, but he had better be careful or she can just as easily ruin him if he misreads the signs and he tries to shag every pretty little bag of bones to pass his way. It's a mistake many of us make, failing to recognise the call of the goddess within us. Then she takes offence, turns into a harpy and ruins us by our sexual misdeeds.

But in any case her manifestation always leaves us feeling empty, dissatisfied with our lives, our lot. And for me at least, I find she comes at the turning of my decades, presaging change, or at least demanding it. And it leaves me fearing old age and death as never before, because at my age, what else is there other than regret I have never once actually touched such loveliness? And we cannot touch it because it is not of this world, yet its presence fills us at times, such as now, with an all consuming urgency, that we simply must have it at any price.

And what else can I do at my time of life that will satisfy the lusts she still kindles within me?

Chapter Five

I calculate it's a month now since my return from the Dales. In all that time she has not once come back to the bookshop. I tell myself I am relieved by this, that it allows me to further rationalise my feelings for her into dust.

The weather has not been kind, the winter hardening, the rains incessant for weeks now. The afternoon is quiet, the street thinned of its crowds, and those who do venture out trot by in a hurry to be elsewhere, rain glistening on the shoulders of their multitudinous and uniformly cheap rainwear.

Maggs is wearing a blue trouser suit, white cotton blouse done up to the neck. She looks a little Edwardian today, very chaste, very proper, very professional. Her trousers are well cut and, like her dresses, make rather a virtue of her overlarge hips and thighs. I apologise for another somewhat crude objectification, but there is not much else to observe in the shop this afternoon, there being so little by way of customers.

I fear I may have used this excuse before.

The fact of Magg's presence is also worth mentioning and somewhat curious. There are other shops in other towns she has responsibility for, but manages always to be in this one on Saturdays, or other days when I'm here, and I'm needing a bit of... well... shall we say 'space'?

Does she think me incompetent? If so, why am I so frequently summoned by speed-dial?

She's just asked me what it is I'm writing and I tell her it's a novel. She smiles indulgently, thinks me a naive fool perhaps and then:

"Oh, Mike it's absolutely pouring!"

"Did you say appalling, Maggs?"

"No, I said *pouring*."

"Yes, a poor afternoon. Bad for custom. I bet we've not even made the rent today."

"And that poor girl."

Maggs' gaze is now fixed upon the rather pale face of the homeless girl. Pale

is not the right word – more ashen – eyes sunken. In other times she would have been described as consumptive. For a while she's sheltered enough in her doorway, but then the wind changes direction, and comes straight at her. She disappears under her sleeping bag, the rain relentless, soaking her through.

'Appalling' is about right, at least in this context – the context of homelessness, and how easily we accept it as normal, how easily we dismiss those reduced in circumstances to a category rather less than human – even comforting ourselves with the delusion they are somehow professional beggars with nice homes and cars to return to, thus neatly negating the need for our involvement, and our guilt.

"We must do something," she says.

"Em... we must?"

"Well... we can't just leave her out there. She could... die, Mike."

"Oh... I rather doubt that. Look... I... I think there's an umbrella in the stock room someone left behind."

"Umbrella, yes. Go fetch it. It'll keep you dry while you nip out and invite her in."

I was thinking more we could perhaps give the girl the umbrella. To actually invite her in strikes me as rather lacking in caution.

"But... she might..."

"Might what?"

"Well... smell or something."

All right... I know, that was an appalling thing to say and in my defence I admit I am ashamed of myself from the moment I say it. What I had really meant to say was that she might be dangerous.

"Oh... Mike, really... this is an old bookshop, it already smells. Go and invite her in. I'll put the kettle on."

The girl visibly recoils when I crouch beside her under my broken umbrella. Usually coins are tossed from a comfortable distance, gazes averted, yet here I am clearing my throat into her personal space and saying "Excuse me", as if I were about to ask the time.

"It's... rather cold. And wet. Won't you come into the bookshop for a bit? Cup of tea? Warm your... bones?"

The girl gives a briskly emphatic shake of the head, says nothing, instead screws up the corners of her mouth as if she's about to growl at me. She is indeed very young, late teens, early twenties at most. Her hair is like a rat's nest, and that deathly pallor does her no good at all. She's also painfully thin, malnourished. She does not, however, so far as I can tell... smell. Of course we know nothing about her, Maggs and I. She could be the worst kind of trouble – mentally ill, violent, a substance abuser...

I back away a little, rather glad actually, to be so firmly rebuffed. Then I look over my shoulder at Maggs, watching from the bookshop, and I shrug, helplessly, but she urges me on for another try – a wide eyed shooing gesture. It instils in me the feeling I will be doing her a disservice if I do not try a bit harder.

Perhaps it's me, my maleness that's the problem, and the girl thinks I'm making unwelcome advances.

"It's all right, really," I tell her. "My boss, Maggs... Margery, over there, she asked me to invite you. She's... already put the kettle on."

I try a bright, encouraging smile, but the girl averts her eyes, stares off at an oblique angle, shutting me out of her world. It's understandable that one in her position must be defensive, but she's clearly also damaged in some way though not so far as I can tell actually… dangerous. I had been against the idea of course, but now the girl has become human to me and I feel wretched I cannot even offer her a cup of tea. Worse is when I turn away in defeat, shake my head at Maggs, and feel more wretched I have let *her* down. This latter is most peculiar, indeed the day is turning out to be a bad lot all round.

"It's no good Maggs. She's not for budging. I'm sorry."

"Not your fault Mike. You tried."

Not my fault? I'd rather felt it was. I cast about for a solution that might please her – not the girl – Maggs. "Perhaps we could take her out a cup of tea?"

This seems to do the trick, makes her feel easier, that she's done her bit, her Christian duty and all that. She brightens and that she brightens brightens me. "Yes. Good idea. Would you take one?"

"Might be better if you took it, Maggs. I think she has a problem with my... maleness."

"Oh? Oh dear. All right then."

So, Maggs brews tea in the neat little pot we usually use, measures out a spoonful of tea each, and one for the pot, pours the girls' out in Maggs' own teacup which she then takes out onto the street, complete with matching saucer. On the one hand this looks ridiculous, on the other there is something undeniably beautiful about it, defiant almost – that dainty china teacup being carried by Maggs – trim suit and a stately gait. She looks a beacon of manners and poise amid a hailstorm of barbarism.

It's very touching.

The girl receives it, eyes still averted, sets the saucer down next to her begging bowl and wraps her mittened hands around the cup to warm them.

When Maggs returns she withdraws into a thoughtful silence. I surmise she is still thinking how to coax the girl indoors, perhaps even to go further, to help her, materially in some way. This worries me. It seems foolish, and I regret to say my only thoughts are I am afraid Maggs' lovely little teacup will get broken, or the strange girl will make off with it.

Then the door jingles and everything is forgotten because...

Well...

My heart leaps.

She wears a long suede coat today, and a sable hat that makes her look like a Russian Princess. And God help me but nothing else exists for a time now but her. And for the whole of that time, I float as if in a dream. As a manifestation of the muse, my *Wellbeloved*, she is quite... heavenly.

"I've brought you these, Mike." she says. Sweet voice, kindly, soft…

A little sad.

And my name. She used my name... remembered it...

She has brought me Miscellany One, by Dylan Thomas, which she purchased

last time, also a copy of Niall Williams' 'Four Letters of Love' (1997).

"That's very kind of you," I tell her.

Note: I am at least in control of myself now.

I had thought she might settle in for a while and browse, but she turns and I fear she's about to leave, but then she smiles. "I wonder," she says. "It sounds silly, but would you pick something out for me?"

"Em... of course. Anything?"

"Anything, really..."

Unusual request. A game of sorts? I smile my best bookshop owner's smile – all right, but were I the owner I imagine that's how he would smile – kindly, erudite, ever respectful. She seems small when I am standing beside her, girlish, delicate. What to choose? She has literary tastes. The God of Small Things by Arundhati Roy (1997) takes my eye. Romantic. Exotic. Tragic. We could do without the tragedy, but such is Romance, and forbidden love, as I recall, but there we go. It's what speaks to me in the moment.

"Have you read this one?"

She shakes her head – the smile, the flawless complexion, the winter glow upon her cheeks, her poise, all of it is such a pleasure to behold... she balances on one leg, tucks one foot behind her ankle, sways there, something little-girlish about it, something to invite my indulgence.

"And perhaps this one – only came in this morning." A collection of poems by Heaney, "The Opened Ground" (1998) something melancholic in Heaney I find. I think she will appreciate it. '97-'98, about the time of the ending of my affairs with Laura and Sandra.

"Oh yes… perfect," she says. "Thank you."

She seems pleased with these choices, hands over another two pound coin, dips her fingertips lightly to my palm. There is a momentary, electrifying contact. Then she takes her leave.

I gaze after her until the crowds flow over her. I'm longing to follow, to sustain the dream, but I cannot, or rather the better part of myself will not allow it, reminding me that whatever it is she is possessed by, and that I want, it is not contained in her physical self – is only symbolised by it.

This is purely spiritual.

When I return to my senses I have The Four Letters of Love to my nose. It's a recent print, still carries the scent of newness about it, but also something else, something delicately perfumed, something young and girlish in it – roses, sweet-pea, lavender. I've read the book before, twenty years ago on its first publication, and am thinking to remind myself of it by reading it again, and slowly, perhaps looking for a key in the words she has also read, while savouring the scent of this perfume from those elegant fingertips, the fingertips that have brushed my palm and turned the pages...

Four letters of love?

Ah...

I'm forgetting throughout all of these introspective musings I have a witness, mute and staring now: Maggs, watching. She says nothing for a while, but the gap between her brows is narrowing.

I feign innocence. "I wonder what all that was about?"

She sighs. "Oh, Mike," she says, her tone more one of sympathy than censure. It is as if she has caught me undressed for a moment, seen my skin disfigured by unsuspected scars.

I blush. "Maggs?"

She chooses not to reply and instead pinches out the line of the creases in her trousers, a careful meditation, then takes up her book, hides her eyes in it.

Perhaps she can see more clearly what I cannot. Something odd has just happened. I don't know what it is, while it's plain Maggs suspects she does. And in the worst case of course, she may be right about that, in which case I'm in even more trouble than I thought.

Chapter Six

People use all sorts of things as ad-hoc bookmarks, then forget to remove them. We have a collection in the bookshop. Bits of string, little torn triangles of paper, business cards, post cards, greetings cards, sympathy cards, pressed flowers, photographs, a squashed pea-pod, a condom – this in a much thumbed copy of The Joy of Sex, as I recall – a rasher of bacon too – both books quite ruined.

Really the variety of everyday items pressed into service as bookmarks is bewildering. We keep them in a small tin of curiosities – it is a tradition at Donnegans. Traditions are important. They are like roots sunk deep into the earth, holding us upright. I do not include the condom in this of course, or the rasher of bacon. I would not have offended Magg's eyes with the sight of the former for anything, and both it and the latter were of course utterly disgusting.

As for the Four Letters of Love, the forgotten bookmark in that is what I suppose, in olden times would have been called a calling card. It flutters into my lap as I settle down to read, that first night. I am at home, rain hammering against the van, the wind nudging it, the lights dimming now and then.

Grace Milner, Hammerton House, Clover Lane, Middleton, Lancs. Phone Number. Email.

The lot.

And, on the reverse, in pencil is written:

Bless me now with your fierce tears, I pray.

It's part of a line from Dylan Thomas's poem, 'Do not go gentle', which I recall is collected in Miscellany One – the other book she donated.

It's a popular poem nowadays, ever since its inclusion in the blockbuster movie Interstellar, but still... it's a peculiar thing to have fall into my lap. And I wonder, just for a moment, if she has left it there on purpose for me to find. There's something erotic too in that line about being blessed by fierce tears, except I'm lifting it out of context of course, twisting it to my own nefariously romantic purposes.

'These are for you,' she'd said. Not, *here's a donation,* or *these are for charity*, but definitely: *'these are for you'.*

Just a turn of phrase, Mike.

Of course, I know that.

But she used my name too, as if for emphasis. *These are for you, Mike.*

To use someone's name is a definite act of reaching out, like her fingers as they explored the bookshelf, seeking contact.

Then Magg's cautionary retort: *Oh Mike...*

In the morning, I rise to a brighter, more clement dawn, pull open the doors of the garage and contemplate Mavis. She's in need of a wash, looks small and vulnerable this morning – chariot of my dreams, conveyor of all my hopes, grown rusty and dusty.

We've known each other for a decade now, so she's pretty much in tune with the way my mind works, and she knows full well I intend cruising along Clover Lane, sussing out this Hammerton House. I don't recognise the name, but remember Clover Lane from my boyhood. There were quarries there, long disused, and little delphs for swimming. It was a place of adventure for the summer holidays.

This is not stalking, I tell myself. I do not want to engineer a chance encounter with Grace Milner. It's more to get a feel for the kind of house she lives in, and from that some clues as to her situation. Hammerton House sounds affluent, sounds one percent-ish. I ask myself again the obvious question: what the hell was she doing in a charity bookshop?

Meanwhile Mavis has already decided it most definitely *is* stalking, and in order to spare me the accusation, withdraws her cooperation, refuses point blank to start. Dead battery. This is not like her at all. Still, I thank her, order a spare from a local factor, and arrange to have it dropped off next day, by which time I promise Mavis I will have come to my senses and we'll have a blast along the promenade at Blackpool for old time's sake instead.

It's inconvenient though, to be car-less, also strange – Mavis always having been so thoroughly reliable in the past. And then my phone is ringing, bringing me back into the present, and to reality.

Maggs.

Another staffing crisis at the bookshop.

"Ah, sorry, Maggs, car's let me down, can't get into town at all. I'll be immobile for a couple of days."

Maggs thinks on this, wonders if I'm making excuses. "Would you like me to pick you up, Mike?"

Is she testing me? The damned cheek!

"Em, but wouldn't that mean leaving the shop unattended?"

"No, Alan's made it in, but he can only stay for a few hours. He's got to take his mum to hospital this afternoon."

All right, m'lady. I shall call your bluff: "Well... if it wouldn't be too much trouble."

I really am in no mood for going in today, but truth be told, I don't like to refuse her, and I know I'll feel better when I get there, so I give her the postcode for her satnav, then tell her she can't miss it, it being the only property on the lane.

She's polite enough, later, as we're driving away, I mean not to mention the fact the property is in fact a ruin and I'm living in a caravan – well not at first, but she's clearly thinking on it.

She has one of those newer shaped VW bugs in bright yellow. It's several years old, but quite tidy and spotlessly clean inside, with a large and exotic looking flower placed in a holder on the dashboard. It also carries the unmistakable fragrance of Le Jardin. She drives carefully, smoothly and with a similar expression to the one she has when she's reading – which is to say cautiously bemused.

"So, you're basically unemployed, Mike?"

Ah. She's not entirely void of curiosity then. "Technically, I suppose, in that I'm not actually paid for anything I do these days."

"But you're not looking for permanent employment?"

"Well, not to be too cynical about it, but I'm led to believe it's pointless at my age. At one time there might have been some casual warehouse work but that's all done by robots now and just as well really because I've been a pen-

pusher all my life and a week doing anything strenuous would surely kill me."

"Then... you claim benefits of some sort?..."

"Lord no. I'd have to spend all day applying for everything under the sun just for the privilege of standing in line to get food vouchers. No I'm living off my savings. So far as the State's concerned I no longer exist, actually. I don't even get junk mail these days, and that's a tremendous relief, I can tell you."

"Savings?" This sounds like an unfamiliar concept to Maggs."And you're... okay with that?"

Meaning what? That I have sufficient to see me through? "Oh, I'll be fine, so long as I don't live past eighty five. I have it all worked out on a spreadsheet. I plan to die with no more than a fiver in my pocket, and leave the cleaning up to the council."

She smiles, entering into the joke, which in fact is no joke – I really do have it all on a spreadsheet, including a theoretical, though quite literal drop-dead date.

"And if you do live past eighty five?"

"Oh no, that's out of the question. It throws my calculations off completely. In that event, Mavis and I will be taking one last journey together. Always supposing I can get her to start."

"Mavis?"

"My car."

"You call your car Mavis?"

She's about to laugh. I wouldn't mind hearing her laugh, come to think of it, but she swallows it back, fears I'll be offended, and she's right, the mood I'm in today, I probably would.

"And one last journey?" she asks. "Wait... I see. Oh, Mike. You're not serious?"

No, I'm not, but in dark times, gallows humour is sometimes, actually, quite funny.

And comforting.

On arrival we find Alan busying himself among the bookshelves. He's obsessive about categorisation, as am I, finds it stressful when customers do not put the books back in strict order – alphabetised by author – as do I (I mean, come on! How difficult is it?) The more he feels under stress, the more obsessive he is about such things, as am I. Strangely he is not so fastidious about his appearance, always in need of a haircut and a shave. At least in this respect we differ.

In his thirties now, Alan is maintained at a functioning level by endless and largely unsupervised prescriptions for anti-depressants. His problem? Same as the rest of us – the total atrophy of hope and autonomy. A primary school teacher, he met his end under the po-faced scrutiny of a panel of besuited advisers and inspectors who had never taught a day in their lives.

"Morning, Alan."

Sometimes he responds, today he does not.

It later transpires he's embarrassed. He has calculated the wrong day for his mum's hospital appointment, is jittery on account of the inconvenience he imagines he has caused to others and is wondering when best to own up. Anyone else would merely keep quiet and go home anyway. When at last his stuttering admission is forthcoming, Maggs surprises me with her compassionate tone, explaining to him it does not matter, and since he's here anyway would he mind holding the fort over lunchtime? Ever the pragmatist is Maggs! But for a time there she also seemed quite... motherly.

In the mean time I am dispatched to Bargain Basement for extra biscuits (close to their sell-by, and therefore cheap).

Alan relaxes as the crisis in his mind passes, becomes altogether more open, and when I return with Custard Creams, he has found a collection of short stories by Conrad for me, asks if I would like it. It was Alan who introduced me to Conrad some time ago and I have gladly added him to my reading list. Alan on the other hand reads nothing else but Conrad, which is a kink I admit even I find peculiar.

I offer to mind the shop over lunchtime instead, since I am also here, except I have neglected to bring lunch and Maggs persuades me to join her at the Market Cafe, as she's been threatening to do for a while. I'm unsure of the etiquette here. It seems a little queer, but all the same impolite to refuse, and she is gently insistent, thus I find myself in a couple with her as we walk out

together.

Actually, I enjoy her rather solid elegance. She has good posture and tremendous presence, and I feel proud to be seen out with her. I am forced to rewrite my description of her husband, transform him into a dapper chap, a professional with greying hair, stylishly long and quiffed into a careless elegance. Golf at the weekend. And he drives a Jaguar. Would all that be too cliched? No, that sort of chap would be perfect for Maggs!

The café is a dour little place, heated marginally above freezing point and rescued from absolute squalor by home-made throws tossed over the backs of otherwise cheap garden chairs. The tables are likewise cheap and wobbly and make eating soup something of a challenge. The lady of the establishment has a well scrubbed, busty look about her, also an aggressive, gravelly market-stall voice softened from the threat of violence only by the liberal and somewhat paradoxical use of the word "love". I'm pleased to note her cutlery and crockery are spotlessly clean.

I look up from my wobbling soup to find Maggs looking at me, pursed lips and dimples, suppressing a smile. She has her hair up in a full sixties beehive, rather like I assume her mother would have worn it. I have a flashback to a scene from the film Marnie, or it might have been the Birds, and Tippi Hedren, bright, blue eyed, slightly haughty. Her hair is blonde and full of shine. She raises a finger thoughtfully to her lips and I catch the glitter of her rings.

"So, actually, Mike," she says, "your house is a ruin and you're living in a caravan."

I was wondering when she'd get around to mentioning that.

"Yes. Though it's nowhere near as grim as you make it sound, Maggs."

"I'm sure. Always loved caravanning as a child."

Hmm, she's not entirely convincing.

I attempt to explain in precis. "Well... I either spend my savings on a proper house, then starve to death before I even hit the pension, or I go on living in the van..."

"I know... until you're eighty five, you said, then you and Mavis do a sort of cinematic 'Thelma and Louise' exit."

"About the size of it, yes. Though I doubt we shall have much of an audience."

"Where are you planning on doing it? Off the end of Southport Pier perhaps?"

"Ha! Now that would be spectacular! I rather like the sound of it, though perhaps Blackpool would be better – more likelihood of the tide being in."

"And that would be in how long, exactly?"

Maggs seems suddenly playful, dare I say even a little coquettish. "Are you fishing for my age, Maggs?"

"Yes. How old are you, exactly, Mike?"

"Well, how old are you, Maggs?"

She does not hesitate. "I'm fifty two," she says. "Fifty three next month."

That's incredible, and barely believable. "No way! But Maggs I wouldn't put you a day past forty." I mean this sincerely, but realise that in my surprise and haste, it may have spilled out like cheap flattery.

She blushes, and I apologise. "Lord... sorry."

"Not at all. I accept the compliment. But you're clearly not for telling me how old you are. Are you embarrassed by it? I think you are, and that's interesting, because why should you be?"

Embarrassed? Yes, I think I am. As for why, I don't know. I shall analyse that one later, add it to my list of notes from a small bookshop.

"Can't you look it up?" I ask. "I'm sure it's on the system or something. I mean, I presume there is a sort of system, isn't there? Donnegans can't possibly be underpinned by the utter shambles I imagine it is."

"I checked. Your age was conspicuous only by its absence, but I hazarded a guess. I reckon you've about thirty years to go, barring accidents and... other unfortunate circumstances."

"Well, that's very kind of you to say so. A little less, actually. But any more would be insufferable."

"Oh, I don't know. You're clearly not past it yet."

"Past it?"

"Life. Living."

"I don't know. I think life has rather left me behind, actually, but when I look at what's generally on offer for most of us these days, I don't think that's such a bad thing."

"Nonsense, you're still getting out of bed in the morning, you love books, sounds like you love your car... and you're writing a novel... how's that going by the way?"

"Em..."

"And you still have an eye for the ladies."

Now she goes too far. "Maggs, really! Not for a long time, I assure you."

"Oh, come on. I'm not blind. That girl had you blushing like a schoolboy."

"Who?" I know who, but cannot help being evasive.

"You know very well who I mean."

"Ah, well... *that*. That's different. It's... it's a bit like my living in a caravan..."

"How can that possibly be the same thing?.."

"I mean both are p... pure... whimsy."

"Whimsy indeed! And as for that: *pick me something* business, that was shameless flirting."

Flirting? I'd not read it that way. "You think so?"

Maggs wonders if she's gone too far, but then, after a moment, goes even further: "She was definitely playing with you. I could have slapped her."

"No!"

"Well... it's absolutely none of my business, but you do know... it's… a bit..."

"What? Ridiculous? Look, you really do misunderstand. I may have been quite... taken by her... but I've no ambitions there at all."

"Well, I'm glad to hear it. I was a bit worried about you, actually."

Worried? I had rather thought Maggs thought nothing of her volunteers when they were not actually volunteering. Or perhaps I'm being unkind, and must write a different story for her.

"I'm in no hurry to make a fool of myself, if that's what you mean." I laugh at the very idea, but only because the idea is uncomfortably close to the truth. "She wasn't flirting though. Absolutely not. I mean... I'm not so old I can't tell the difference any more."

Except, obviously I am.

Maggs nods, uncertain, but I take her curiosity as being well meant, even protective. There seems something unusually warm and solicitous about her today, I mean away from the shop, and I find myself wanting to confide in her.

"It's just..." I hesitate, wondering if I'm pushing our new found relationship too far, but she seems eager for the confidence.

"Oh?"

"You know... everywhere you look these days, it's all so grey and hopeless. We've been like this getting on for a generation now, and everyone looks utterly crushed by it. But just now and then you see someone, and they stand out, they remind you of something you once had yourself, or wanted, but have since lost sight of along the way, and you think if you could only get to know them, you might remember what it was."

"Something you lost?"

"A belief in something... something worth shining your shoes for at least. It's nothing I can put my finger on. Not like money or a new car or coming up on the lottery. Hard to explain, but I think of it like a light at the end of the tunnel. Only now, in order to save money, the light's been turned off, and all there is is this endless tunnel of gloom."

She sits back, sighs. "Well... you're a cheerful lunch companion, that's for sure. But I do know what you mean."

I attempt an impish smile by way of apology. "This is an excellent soup by the way."

She returns the smile with an equal impishness, winks. "That's the spirit."

On the way back we call into the pie shop for a pasty for the homeless girl, but when we seek out her little doorway, she's not there - just her sleeping bag curled up empty. We look across at Donnegans and she's sitting in the window with Alan on the settee drinking tea. Neither is looking at the other, but there's something companionable about them all the same.

Alan! The dark horse...

How on earth did he manage that?

On reflection, I suppose it's a question of damage. I do struggle with myself at times, but am not yet so terribly broken I cannot deal with the world, albeit in somewhat eccentric ways. But how can anyone remain undamaged, remain functioning, and also be considered trustworthy by those more completely broken? For surely to survive the system, we must be *of* the system?

I had thought one of the redeeming features of recent times was the de-stratification of society, that the ninety nine percenters consist of the former working classes and the collapsed middle, all jumbled up and subsisting now on the same paltry wages, in the same squalid conditions, working for the same tyrannical bastards. But I am forgetting this more subtle delineation between those who are broken, and those who remain, as yet, functioning.

There is a distinction amongst the functioning in society, between those who instinctively aspire to the one percent, and those who would sooner devote their time exploring ways of repairing what is broken. Alan, God bless him! He still has a soul, struggling through his blushes and his stutters, to express itself. Maggs too I think – something angelic beneath the gloss and that haughty demeanour.

Where does that leave me?

The bigger shoe man's plaintive cry cuts through the noise of the street. I am inspired to buy a copy of his magazine, and thus feel I too am doing my bit. He calls me sir, thanks me like he does not deserve it, and I am ashamed of my normal relations with a world that cannot afford him any better life than this.

Chapter Seven

So...

Grace Milner teaches English at the local sixth form examination factory. She is twenty six and holds a master's degree in Literature from Oxford University. She likes reading, travel, dance, and taking long country walks. She writes poetry and altogether sounds like my ideal partner, except her partner is Melvyn Judd. He sells second-hand supercars out of a space-age dealership in Blackpool. He likes big game hunting, exotic travel and working out – oh, and he drives a Maserati. He is thirty three, has an impressively ribbed chest and small, tight little buttocks. And before you ask, all of this intelligence is gleaned with appalling ease from social media.

It was necessary first of all to create my own spoof accounts in order to do this. It's not difficult. Nor is it difficult to create accounts under false identities, which rather suggests to me the fakeness of one's projected identity is neither here nor there to the machinery. All that matters is the profile we create by browsing habits, and which can be linked to our network connection and machine identity – all of which pins us to an approximate address. Thus, regardless of any disguise, the machine knows who we are, even if at times we don't. Ostensibly this is so that it might send you adverts for stuff it thinks you might like to buy, but also through a maze of back doors, it works in collusion with the state security apparatus when required to do so. It can also, of course, be used to subvert democracy by means of psychological warfare. Yes, I do know about computers, and networks – but being something of a misanthrope, I simply have no use for social media.

Also interesting to note, so far as I can tell, Maggs has no online presence either, which is a pity, because after the day's revelations, I would not have minded learning a little more about her story as well. I am beginning to suspect she is a sociopath too. And who can blame her?

Anyway, Grace has posted photographs from walks she has taken in the Western Pennines, places I know and love, and I want to comment on her pictures, tell her I've been there too, that I love such-and-such a place, love that view etc, and know it well. There is for a moment, something urgent about this, as if in failing to do so I risk missing a vital connection with this woman. I resist the temptation, but find its urgency interesting.

I note from Grace's pictures, her focus on life is outwards. There are no selfies – only her profile picture to confirm her identity. She is indeed a lovely looking young woman, but not a narcissist, unlike Melvyn. She is more

simply bound up in this notion that the view of the world through our own eyes contains a clue to its existential importance. Melvyn's view is the opposite, that the meaning of life is bound up entirely in himself and the sooner others take notice of that the better. Both views are perhaps delusional, the former forgivable, the latter not. The only firm conclusion I can draw is they are not well matched.

As I scroll through Grace's pictures, I come upon one of Donnegans, attractively shot in late afternoon sunshine: #streetscene, #bookshop, #charity, #loveit. #donotgogently

Do not go gently?

Again, I'm minded to comment – something innocuous, like: *thank you and welcome, regards, Mike (Donnegans).* But my ID is fake, and even were it not, it's hardly my place to comment on behalf of the bookshop, being only a volunteer minder. It's also rather obvious I would have been unlikely to find her picture if I had not been stalking her. And if we would avoid being perceived as weird by others we would do well to avoid getting found out in the first place.

The latter hashtag is puzzling, a reference to Dylan's Miscellanies again. I mean why would that interest anyone else in this context? But then much of the social media milieu puzzles me. It seems designed to latch upon the basics of human insecurity, provide us with a means of self broadcast and an arbitrary measure of popularity that can easily be faked and gamed, and in some cases even bought.

Grace has no likers, no followers. She is lonely in her view of the world, as well she might be. Not even Melvyn has liked her pictures. Melvyn, I note has lots of followers, all of them with enormous tits and overly inflated bottoms.

Anyway...

The following morning dawns unseasonably warm and in bewildering contrast to the previous day's bitterness. Soft sunshine slants in at the window of my bedroom and I rise sweating to a van that is roasting for my having kept the burner in overnight in order, I'd thought, to prevent myself from freezing to death.

The new car battery arrives, and I venture out to the garage to fit it.

While I work, I ponder my own social media profile – I mean if I had a real one – and how I might jazz it up to make my life sound more interesting than

it actually is. But the deeper connections we make with others come through precisely those intangible banalities we'd probably all sooner gloss over. In truth we don't know why we are attracted to others, what it is that holds us together, only that it is not the hammy adverts we create for our selves – Melvyn's big game hunting for example, which I rather suspect to be bullshit.

But through such extravagant claims, Melvyn pitches himself as an aspiring one percenter – about the only group these days with any interest, to say nothing of the money, to indulge in the shooting of exotic creatures for fun. I'm sure it's perfectly legal, and is often justified, somewhat paradoxically, I admit, on grounds of wildlife preservation, but if you ask me it's not a good look. Then I suppose Melvyn is not interested in online friend requests from the likes of Mike Garatt. Of course I dislike him immensely, not so much for his ribbed chest, nor his small buttocks, which to be frank look ridiculous, but more of course for his claim to being the possessor of the sexual object, also known as Grace Milner.

Sexual object?

Yes, I'm afraid so, and here I hesitate to tread for fear misinterpretation.

It's hard to describe her any other way, at least when viewed through Melvyn's eyes, as evidenced by the number of photographs he displays of his prize – who, shall we say, wears a bikini very well indeed. There is also undue emphasis on her bosom, and her posterior. None of these borderline risque captures however comes close to realising the profound simplicity of that young woman's expressive grace, a thing glimpsed but fleetingly as she ran a finger along the shelves of an old bookshop. She has also rather a beautiful smile – something enigmatic in it, that I admit I'm possibly inventing. Such things speak to the eternal, and the ultimately unattainable. Tits and bums on the other hand speak only to a man's penis.

Conclusion: Melvyn is a dick.

Sex is a different kind of pleasure, is it not? Attainable at times, but always fleeting and leaving you wanting more.

So... she is a graduate of Literature, a learned and sophisticated woman, also a sexual object. I suspect I know how Grace would prefer to measure the potential of her life, but I can also see how it is more likely measured in reality by others, and by men in particular.

By lunchtime, the temperature has risen to a little above the magical twelve

degrees – this being the temperature at which I have judged Mavis' vinyl top can be folded down without undue risk of splitting it. Wearing a woolly hat and a stout jacket I set off, not, I hasten to add, in order to swing by Clover Lane – I'd promised Mavis a cruise along the promenade at Blackpool, and I'm superstitious about these things, so Blackpool it is, after dropping off the old, dead battery at the recycling centre.

The roads are dry and dusty, so there is not a lot of salt for sticking to her undersides – I am paranoid about her dissolving, and the thought of those rusty sills is gnawing at me. I am thinking I could chuck the towel in at eighty four, instead of eighty five, and get them fixed up properly, or call it eighty and just buy another damned car. What is it about Mavis that's so special to me anyway?

Blackpool's a good run from Middleton, bracing with the top down in February, but doable with the heater cranked up and roaring. I suppose the truth is she makes me feel like I'm twenty five again, though there is something in her vulnerabilities that speaks also to an awareness of my own creeping mortality.

Would I wish Grace for a passenger, I wonder? Naturally, one so attractive would make for a fine adornment, somewhat cliched I suppose, and I tell myself most likely she would be complaining of a draught before we had gone a mile. In protest at my thoughts, Mavis jabs the ABS light on, denying me the greater assurance of the anti lock braking system, and thus my excesses with the throttle. It's not something I'm often in need of, ABS, but feel myself duly chastised nevertheless. It's most likely a faulty sensor, something she's been nagging me about for a while, and another potential MOT failure should she decide to be particularly vindictive. Such a repair is beyond me, also expensive, but I realise matters must be faced eventually.

We come at Blackpool from the Saint Anne's end, cruise the promenade – a grey, heavy sea, foaming white at the defences, gulls shrieking gaily in a briny air. Most of us from the North have a fondness for Blackpool, part nostalgia I suppose. It can be by turns seedy and saucy, both elegant and vulgar, but never dull. It's most likely where we made our first sand pies – Dad supervising from a deck-chair in shirt and tie. Its postcards are also helpful to the adolescent in laying a foundation to his beliefs that sex can also be funny. This of course is contrary to the claims of contemporary pornography, that women are merely a collection of holes, and unless she looks horribly distressed, she is not really enjoying it.

Before quitting Blackpool's environs, I check the satnav, punch in a detour, and, before Mavis can react to what I'm up to, I've taken a swing by the

second-hand supercar dealership, on pretence of trading her in for a Maserati! That should chasten her, though I hesitate to predict her revenge!

Melvyn is easy enough to spot behind his space-age glass topped desk, surrounded by all that motoring opulence. A heady scent of virgin rubber and polish pervades the air. It's quite exhilarating, something sexual about it too. He wears a decent suit, though rather a more shiny shade of grey than I would be comfortable in myself. He is also a little overly groomed, and has clearly spent a fortune having his teeth whitened, to a degree I can best describe as luminescent. I know this is the current cultural trajectory, but it must be awfully inconvenient – maintaining this million dollar smile.

The overall impression he gives is one of spending an inordinate amount of time in front of the mirror. It's a mistake of course, looking like one's trying too hard, but I forgive him on account of his youth and inexperience. The better salesman presents himself in such a way as to give the impression of having spent no time at all on his flawless appearance, that it is more a result of superior breeding, a class immeasurably superior to the customer, but one the customer is invited to partake of merely by signing up to the salesman's products.

On this basis Melvyn is never going to sell me this Maserati, even if I wanted it – well, all right a part of me does want it – but other than that nothing attracts me to his world at all. Yes, I could buy it, cash, but that would mean checking myself out at seventy which does not strike me as being a reasonable exchange. I am cash rich, but even so fortunate a position as that becomes rapidly precarious when one is otherwise unemployable.

I manage to sustain the pretence by asking him for a trade-in price on Mavis, while hoping by now she can read my mind and know I am not at all serious, otherwise I'll definitely be in trouble on the way home. Here, he lets himself down, revealing a grungier back story, even kicking one of Mavis' tyres like she's some festering old banger. The tyres are recent, and handle superbly. He offers me two hundred quid – this against a car he's pushing for sixty grand. I suppose the clientèle who normally frequent this palace consider trade-ins to be a bit... well... shall we say working class?

Bastard!

But anyway, usually at this point the salesman feigns embarrassment at his own necessarily meagre offer, and becomes your best friend, offering to speak to his boss, to see what can be done. After much huffing and puffing he might then come back with an offer of two hundred and twenty, take it or leave it. But Melvyn isn't trying very hard, and does not offer me the courteous farce

of the old "consult my boss" routine. He still has me clocked as interested though – benefits of dressing well, I suppose – but I decline a test drive, merely walk out on good terms with a handshake, also his business card and a promise to think on it. There is clearly still plenty of money around but, like the blacked out windows of all the SUVs surrounding Melvyn in that space-age showroom, it is difficult these days to put a face to any of it.

All right, I had already surmised from his social media activity Melvyn was a poseur and a bit of an arse, but my visit to the dealership confirms it. And his smile has a very definite droop about the corners that betrays an insincerity lurking very close to the surface. I would most certainly not buy a used car from that man.

Yes, of course I am biased, even jealous; have I not already admitted this? But the outing has had its desired effect; that Grace Milner can smile so sweetly and parade her semi naked body so freely for such an oily, pretentious twat as this, renders it rather obvious she is but a temporary vehicle for the muse, rather than the Muse herself, which bodes well for my chances of safely moving. But it also means it is more or less inevitable Melvyn is going to hurt her, if he has not done so already.

And I am saddened by that.

Chapter Eight

All right, so I am not in love with Grace Milner. How many times must I tell you? And if I tell you often enough will I be able to convince myself? I mean, if I were really in love with her, I could not speak of it in such a detached manner, like a disinterested analyst probing someone else's neuroses.

Could I?

It's age, I suppose – that and my life's experience which has taught me to view the deeper emotions from a position somewhat remote from reality. Were I in love with Grace Milner, there would be nothing to ground that love in, no prospect, nor even hope of denouement. And Williams' 'Four Letters of Love' reminds me anyway a man truly in love would be oblivious of all else, to the point of sickness.

It is this detachment, this remaining self awareness, if you like, that I use to protect myself from the damage and the inevitable humiliation of all such transient infatuations.

Do not go gently.

I meant what I had told Maggs over lunch that time. There was no danger of my making a fool of myself, of *raging at the dying of the light*. What I feel for Grace Milner is something merely to be weathered, for at times such is the Muse and it is not the first time this has happened to me, nor will it be the last. No, I will not rave. I will indeed go very gently, with dignity, and hopefully a neat little half Windsor knot in my tie, and understated gold cuff-links to finish off the assemblage.

Her sadness though…

Her sadness haunts me.

"Would you like something to read, Lesley?" I ask.

The homeless girl is called Lesley. She is sitting on the sofa in the window, drinking tea. I have purchased an orphaned teacup and saucer from Age Concern, which I have washed and am now calling the girls – she being a more regular visitor these days – especially in inclement weather, as it is today – and thereby have rather deftly rescued Maggs' own rather fine China one.

I note with some amusement, I am becoming mysteriously protective of Maggs.

There's something about the girl, and Maggs' compassion for her, that renders her vulnerable – not the girl, Maggs. I'm sure the girl can look after herself, but only, I suspect, at the expense of a callous disregard for the feelings of others. This may seen churlish, and I am hopeful she will prove me wrong.

It's another foul day, the world seemingly turning to water, the street awash, the little borders of my garden at home permanently filled, as if the water table is rising and will shortly be floating the van away. She's been on the sofa for an hour, and I ask if she would like something to read, only because she looks bored, though I would have thought boredom was a thing she could deal with easily, staring out into space all day like that. I wonder what places in her head she goes to for respite.

By way of evasive reply, she asks: "Is Alan not here today?"

"He'll be in around twelve," I tell her. Or at least that's the plan. One never knows with Alan.

Actually, I'm hoping he'll be here a little sooner, then I can go before Maggs arrives, in case she invites me out to lunch again. I don't know why I'm nervous about that. She's due at twelve fifteen. I'm only doing a half day, which is long enough to be in company with the girl. She seems comfortable only with Alan, looks obliquely at anyone else, as if to pretend they are not there.

It's most discomforting.

The silence between us is pointed this morning, and awkward, and she evades all my efforts at light conversation. I'm not alone in this – she is also rather surly with Maggs, Maggs' problem being her authority, I presume because authority in the girl's eyes is not to be trusted, or in any case relied upon for any genuine assistance. What her problem is with me, I've no idea, beyond my maleness which I seem to carry with shame whenever she is around.

Maggs' day began in our Clitheroe shop, redistributing stock and cashing up. She is now en-route for Middleton. The forecast is for this incessant rain to turn to snow. The sky has taken on rather a bleak, greenish tinge, and I'm hoping she'll be all right. The A59 can be tricky in poor weather.

Her story is a common one – the girl's, not Maggs'. This much she has confided to Alan, and Alan in me. Remember, Alan is not a simpleton, he is

merely suffering from the aftershocks of a nervous breakdown. True, he does not present himself well, but I judge him to be of good character, and an astute listener.

There is no father, he's told me, and the mother is an alcoholic, dependent upon a string of manipulative men who have each taken an unhealthy, interest in the girl. Her choice was to move out or face endless molestation. She has been homeless in Sheffield, Manchester and Preston, moved into the smaller market towns to avoid the drugs and the casual street violence, and the ghouls who would groom her for a prostitute.

There are drugs in Middleton of course, like everywhere now, but they are easier to avoid here if you are not interested in them. She can get by at times sleeping with men of her own choosing, moving on when they tire of her. Meanwhile she surfs the sofas of acquaintances, otherwise it's doorways. Only rarely does she use the homeless-hostels on account of her mistrust of authority.

I wonder if it is this that has us look askance at the destitute. We can only function if we convince ourselves the seedy underbelly of the world does not really exist, and we can only do this day by day if we ignore its victims, like Lesley, who lay scattered so liberally now at our feet.

Then I remember Alan has also told me the girl cannot read, and I feel a fool. She must struggle terribly.

"Em... I mean..."

I'm interrupted in my embarrassment by a 'phone call: Maggs.

An abandoned shop on Market Street is in the process of being cleared out. In order to get around the council's punitive rates, intended to discourage empty retail space lending the town an impoverished look, the owners had filled it with books and junk and called it a charity shop – a somewhat cynical ploy, since the shop was always shut and looked a mess anyway. But the lease is shortly to be taken up by a discount convenience store so the space is to be emptied. Skips have been ordered.

"Nip round with a couple of boxes and salvage as much clean stock as you can will you, Mike?"

It's the usual high handed manner, though she does add that she will meet me there to help. She must have known about this for days, yet rings me now at the last minute. I had planned to walk that afternoon, but the weather is

looking nastier by the second, and there is nothing I enjoy more than a rummage among old books.

So...

"Righto Maggs, I'll be round just as soon as Alan gets in."

Alan duly arrives, shaking the rain from his hat and Lesley brightens, looks ready for conversation. I wonder if Alan is in any danger of manipulation. There is nothing like a wounded man for fastening on to a woman in hope of a cure for whatever ails him. And I should know. There is also nothing like a woman for detecting it. In later life I have discovered there is romantic love, and then there is romantic pragmatism.

Either, I suppose, is fine.

I gather plastic crates from the stock-room and set out to do Maggs' bidding.

"Shop's closed, mate."

So says the hard hatted and somewhat monosyllabic youth who attempts to block my access to the gutted cavern that is to be our new budget emporium, our new source of cut price baked beans. I explain my mission and he shrugs, tells me half the books have already been chucked out. Is it my imagination or does he take a perverse pleasure in this? That he is doing society a good turn by ridding it of books.

Anyway, I am at least permitted to help myself to what's left. However the quest is not promising, most of the scant remains are by now curly with damp. I rescue a copy of Heaney's poems from under various bits of detritus on the floor. Miraculously, it's still in fair condition, a good reading copy anyway, and a rare find.

Wait a minute?

Heaney?

Did I not give a copy to Grace Milner? Not this one, obviously, but still... a coincidence? An echo from the universe?

Spooky!

The other books are all, sadly, trash, even the ones in good condition, latter day bodice rippers, publishers surplus, spared but temporarily from pulp.

They stand out a mile – still, there is no accounting for taste, and some are in very good condition indeed, also attractively bound. I take a breath and begin the task of rescuing the quality and the vaguely promising from execution.

There are also bonkbusters aplenty – indeed judging by their surfeit it rather seems the bottom has fallen out of that market altogether now. I resist them as being somewhat indecorous and therefore unsuitable for the staid environs of Donnegans.

I remember in the movie Charing Cross Road, Anthony Hopkins' bookseller toured the country houses of England in search of stock. A derelict fake charity shop is about my lot, but then my life has always been a litany of the absurd.

"Ah, Mike... well done."

Maggs is breathless, flushed, snug in raincoat, chin buried in a chenille scarf. She at once brightens the dour interior, banishes its mustiness with Le Jardin.

I'm about to apologise and tell her it's slim pickings but note instead she has a bruised eye and this temporarily robs me of words.

She has applied extra layers of makeup to tone the bruising down, but it is still obvious, and at the sight of her wounding I feel the known world tilt upon its axis.

"Oh," she says, lightly. "Banged myself on a kitchen cupboard. Rushing around, you know? Does it show much?"

Still I do not move. She knows I do not believe her, the clue is in the lightness of her tone, that I am being invited, for the sake of normality between us, to partake of the lie that she has banged herself on a kitchen cupboard.

"Maggs?"

She suspects my concerns, suspects my suspicions, rejects them all with a hardening of her look. "It's nothing, Mike. Now... let's see. What have you got? Not more poetry I hope... oh... all right. We'll keep the Heaney. Didn't you give a copy to... what's her name? You'll probably pinch it anyway. What else?... oh dear... not much to go at is there."

"Em...afraid not. The lad said a lot's already gone into the skip out back. I was going to take a look, but it's likely to be spoiled with rain by now."

"Let's take a look anyway. You never know. After all there's nothing much else to see here, is there?"

"Maggs?"

"Nothing to *see*, Mike."

"No, of course not. Em, the skip, then. It's this way."

Am I wrong? Is this not what it looks like? Is it, after all, just a silly collision with a kitchen cupboard and not a man's fist?

She pauses. "Oh, hang on. What about these?" She moves to lift a couple of bonkbusters from the shelf. One cover features a blindfolded woman in a scarlet corset with a whip draped around her neck. Another features a pair of pert and improbably pneumatic buttocks insubstantially clad, hands cuffed in the small of her back. "These are in good condition, don't you think?"

I flinch as she thrusts the buttocks at me, so to speak. "Em... well... I just thought... you know."

"But they sell like hot cakes. Chuck 'em in."

"If you say so, Maggs."

"Oh, Mike, come on. Don't be such a prude!"

I scoop the titles up and drop them into the box.

Outside, the skip is piled with junk, books scattered willy-nilly like confetti, all of them by now soaking and miserable and spoiled. I rummage deep, thinking to turn up something that might have avoided the wet, turn up a handful of Penguin Classics: Hardy - Tess of the d'Urbervilles and Jude the Obscure. Curiously, there is also a copy of the Wellbeloved - not the sort of thing that pops up at random and, like the Heaney, has rather the feel of a queer echo about it.

Maggs stands aside, stiffly, hands in pockets, wrinkles her nose. "They're spoiled. And boring."

I toss them back. "Not the most uplifting of his works anyway."

"Did Hardy ever write anything uplifting?"

"Oh... you know... some of his stuff works out all right in the end."

"I'll take your word for that. So... we've got some poetry, some soft BDSM, and some remaindered bosom heavers that even the publishers couldn't sell with an entire marketing department behind them?"

"About the size of it."

This is a different side to Maggs. Something ironic, cynical in her tone. It's not like her. The blow to her eye, however it was caused, has also wounded her spirit. She's bleeding today.

"Makes you wonder why they bothered publishing it in the first place," I suggest. "Pity we don't stock DVDs as well – there's a load of them in here too."

I recover one from the skip, wipe the rain from it. We have resisted DVDs at Donnegans. They're not the best of things to sell – usually damaged, play half way, then skip back to the beginning, requiring refund. The result is loss of reputation and a grovelling apology, both of them mine – mine being the more frequent face of Donnegans.

She brightens for a moment. "What have you there?"

"Em,... Mork and Mindy?"

"Oh, I used to love that show."

"Really?"

"Yes. *Hi, I'm Mork,from Ork! Nanoo, nanoo!*"

She manages the funny voice very well, looks momentarily charming while she does it, but the smile freezes as the memory of something else passes before her, then her eyes are red and she's turning away. "Come on, it's freezing. Let's get back to the shop."

As we leave the yard, she is at pains to keep her face turned away from mine while she regains composure. It takes a while. I would rewrite again the story I have for her husband, but I don't know where to begin. Only monsters hurt women. But how could one so elegant and charming and intelligent as Maggs be so blind as to marry a monster? How could one so elegant and charming as Grace Milner be so blind as to date a total wanker?

Serendipitous conclusion: Both Grace Milner and Maggs are elegant and charming – which is interesting.

The rest is a mystery.

"Have you eaten?" I ask.

"No. It's all been rather frantic so far. I doubt I'll ever catch up with myself today."

"Then would you care for some soup to warm you up?"

She looks at me, a searching look, one I've seen in a woman's eyes often enough. I don't know why I asked, since all morning I've been dreading the possibility of her inviting me. I suppose I'd wanted to cheer her up, as pathetic as that might sound, given her probable situation at home.

Oh, Maggs.

"That would be lovely Mike," she says. There's a 'but' coming. I can feel it, see her forming it in her mind prior to giving voice, but she needn't fear it,... after all, I'm just the mug who takes up the slack at Donnegans' Middleton branch. I'm hardly going to take a 'no' as a rejection of more intimate intentions. Then I see her change her mind, see a fresh resolve in the jut of her chin.

"Yes, that would be absolutely lovely," she says.

I hold out the DVD to her. Mork and Mindy. A gift, I'm saying. "I wouldn't hold out your hopes though. You know what old DVDs are like. It's probably damaged."

She takes it, slides it into her coat pocket. Something secret between us. "Worth a try though, eh? Thanks."

Yes, I hope it works. She looks like she could do with some cheering up, and contrary to certain opinion, a journey into the past can sometimes reveal our missteps along the way. Whether we can do anything about it after that though is another matter.

Chapter Nine

Soup today is Carrot and Coriander. Not my favourite.

Maggs has recovered herself, regained her carriage, her humour, though I cannot imagine what she must be thinking – I mean the fact of going home again, to him, though I suppose this is not the first time it has happened.

What's most appalling to me though is I've known Maggs for quite some time now and been entirely blind to any of this. For all of my supposedly erudite observations regarding the cut of her trousers, I have missed the more vital underlying truth, the unpleasantness she lives with every day. Or rather, no, I had picked up on it but overlooked the cause - elevated it to something more existential when all along it was the brutal fact of living with an occasionally violent man.

"Goodness, Mike. People will be talking."

"Hmm?"

"Becoming a bit of a habit. Anyone would think we were having an affair."

"Em… twice is hardly a habit, Maggs."

I blush at the thought of an affair with Maggs. I mean at the thought of anything... intimate. With Maggs.

She frowns. "True. I'm sorry, by the way, about earlier – for calling you a prude. I'm sure you're not. But those books do sell rather well. I guarantee they'll be gone by weekend."

"Oh quite." I'm lost for conversation now, feeling rather flat, yet not wanting to stall Maggs' sudden halting gain in altitude. Try a little cheekiness perhaps? See how she responds? "You know, I find ladies are far more confident in seeking out that sort of thing. The men would insist I put it in a brown paper bag for them."

"True. Except ladies seek erotica. Men just want smut. The mechanics of it. No emotion."

"Oh, now steady on! Not all of us are like that. I'm partial to a little thoughtful erotica myself."

She feigns surprise. My ruse is working – her spirits rallying. I would also like to disabuse her of the idea I might be in any way a prude.

"Really?" she says. "Name me some proper erotica then."

"Well… em..."

"You can't can you?"

"Hang on, give me a chance. There's the Story of O, of course – Pauline Réage. Then there's Anais Nin's various writings."

"Really?"

"Then there's Lawrence and Lady Chatterley... a good novel in my opinion, to say nothing of being exquisitely..."

"All right, all right. Point taken."

She looks uncertain now. "So... you're not married?"

Curious tack following on from one's erotic reading habits? as if the one precludes the other. Well, no sense in evading the question. I'm just wondering how far she wishes to go with it.

"Never married, no."

"Any particular reason?"

Interesting question. Analyse: "Spent rather a lot of my time on the road, actually, I mean professionally, which rather complicates things." Sounds better than simply being a coward when it comes to commitment.

"Girlfriend?..."

"No."

"I mean ever?"

"Well... there have been relationships, but... I'm afraid I was rather silly in my past and by the time I came to my senses I'd rather missed the boat, so to speak."

"No girlfriend? You do surprise me."

"Well, there we are."

"Just the one unfortunate infatuation then?" she teases.

"Well, quite, and the least said about that the better. Hardly the same thing as a proper relationship."

Strange. Have you noticed how people who are married assume an air of superiority over the singletons, even if their marriage is a sham and a disaster? No, that's unfair. I'm not sure how Maggs views her marriage, and don't worry, I shan't be asking

"Don't people meet online these days?" she asks. "I would have thought it quite easy to meet up with someone doing it that way."

"I imagine so, but I'm happy living the bachelor life. I suspect I come across as a bit of a bore, actually. A man my age, well past his sell by date. Bookish. Intense. Calls his car Mavis. Too self-absorbed by half. Not much of a catch, am I? I'd have to lie brazenly to make myself sound interesting."

"Silly?"

"Hmm?"

"You did something 'silly', you said, earlier."

"Oh, I'd... rather not go there if you don't mind. It's not something I'm proud of, and I'd hate for you to think badly of me."

"Well, now you've really got me curious!" Her expression darkens. "You didn't... hurt anyone did you?"

Does she mean physically? I think she does. Lord, Maggs, what do you take me for? "Oh... no, nothing like that. It was just a little... indiscretion on my part,..."

"Indiscretion?"

"Em... too many girls at the same time. But I assure you no one was injured. Though admittedly that was on account of neither finding out about the other..." I'm sweating, stumbling. Can I really still be so ashamed of myself after all these years? Change of subject needed. Fast. "So... anyway... what about you? Married?"

Damn!

She contemplates the rings on her fingers. "Obviously."

"Long?"

"Oh... twenty years or so."

I'm about to congratulate her, but remember myself, noting also she does not have the number of years precise as if she stopped counting a while ago. And then she tells me: "My husband drinks, Mike."

She leaves me to write whatever story I want around that. It covers all manner of sins, any number of humiliations, including black eyes.

"I'm... very sorry to hear that."

"He hasn't always. But then life... has been rather unkind to him."

So, she forgives him, rationalises it. Not unusual. The beaten often blame themselves for the excesses of the beater. The fact remains he hurts her, and that appals me, I mean the thought of anyone hurting Maggs...

"Em..."

"Mike?"

"Look... none of my business, Maggs. I'll say this just the once, and I don't want you to take it the wrong way."

"There you go again."

"Please... seriously. If you ever need a sofa to crash on, you know you can call on me."

She says nothing for a long time, just stares at me. I fear I've overstepped the mark. I mean, it wouldn't be a sofa for Maggs, I have a spare room I keep tidy. And when someone's drunk enough to start hitting you, no matter how you rationalise it, what you most need is somewhere else to be until they sober up and calm down. That's what I'd meant. It's a purely practical thing. Of course there are complications, like involving myself, to say nothing of her husband thinking we are indeed having an affair, and what might ensue from such an obvious misunderstanding... but all I'm thinking of right now is the need to

protect her.

Finally she sighs, gives a nod. There's a flicker in her eyes that conveys her thanks, but no indication she will ever consider taking me up on the offer. I don't know if I should be relieved about that or not.

I stay on at the shop for the afternoon. What with Maggs and me and Alan and Lesley, the atmosphere becomes quite busy for a place that provides remuneration for only one of us, and then not much. Lesley makes herself useful brewing tea. On her feet I note she is a very thin girl, and small. Maggs brings two pies. One for Alan, one for Lesley. Alan declines, Lesley eats both.

I sense something awakening in her, Lesley I mean, as if all it wanted was a little nourishment to take root.

The light begins to go at four and Lesley gathers her things, prepares to leave. I ask if she has anywhere safe to sleep and she nods, then melts away. Why do I not offer her my sofa, as I have offered it to Maggs? Clearly I am more afraid of Lesley. Why? Obviously I now consider the young more unpredictable and dangerous to me than my peers.

Alan departs early to check on his mum, and Maggs sits in the window reading. She has finished the McEwan, opened one of the bonkbusters, sees me looking, and smirks back.

"So what?" she says.

This is usually the dead hour, a relaxing time at Donnegans. I take out the notebook, write down my impressions, including those of Maggs. There is no danger in this. She would never be so crass as to try to steal a look.

"It's fine if you want to get off, Mike."

"No bother. I'll see it through."

"Okay. Thanks. Lesley seemed more friendly today, don't you think?"

"Yes... and she brews a good cup of tea."

"I wonder where she's sleeping."

"Perhaps best not to think about it. Probably the hostel on Deane road."

"Kind of you to give her that five pound note."

"Oh, no bother. I took it out of the till."

"Ha! Very funny. Still... it was kind of you."

"Rather wish there was more I could do, but I don't see what."

"I know. I feel the same. But she's not a kid – just looks like one."

I see her checking her watch now and then throughout this last hour of business – not wishing the time to pass more quickly, but wishing it more slowly – and not I presume for extending the pleasure of my company, more to postpone her journey home.

"You'll be all right?" I ask. The words are out before I can check them for neutrality, for ambiguity. After all, what can I do about Maggs' domestic arrangements? Any more than I can do about Lesley's lack of them.

She understands. Smiles bravely. "I'll be fine, Mike. Thank you."

"Really, Maggs, I..."

I don't know what I'm about to say – something about being sorry, again, maybe reminding her of my sofa. I don't know. It would have gushed out, incoherent and embarrassing, but I'm saved by the bell.

The doorbell.

It jingles and the room darkens as a big man enters, grey coated. He has rather a puffy, pock marked face, and several days of stubble. He's dripping rain, trails an atmosphere of menace. Could be trouble, I'm thinking. There is always someone coming in at the last minute, and they take an age as if deliberate in their obstruction of closing time. Then I wonder if it's Magg's husband – don't know where I got that one from. But no, I realise this is a different level of authority altogether as he unfolds from a wallet his warrant card.

A policeman?

He has a picture to show us. "Have you seen this woman?" A soft voice, but clear, and something dangerous in it.

He shows it to Maggs first. She does not answer right away, but looks across

at me, something akin to alarm in her eyes. Had she not done that, none of what followed might ever have happened. As it is the policeman reads intrigue, and stores it up for later. It causes him to make telephone calls he might not ordinarily have felt necessary.

It's a picture of Grace Milner.

Chapter Ten

I tell him yes, that I have seen her in the shop.

'And when would that have been, sir? The last occasion?'

It was just a couple of weeks ago. She came in with a donation of books. And there had been another occasion a few weeks before that to make a purchase.

The policeman is perhaps wondering at our lack of vagueness, wondering why Grace Milner stands out for us. He remains impassive, but I know this is what he's thinking. He makes notes. Takes names. Addresses.

But I must ask him: "Is everything all right? Is she all right?"

He cannot say, routine enquiries and all that, asks if we can think of anything else that might be helpful, anything she might have said, how she seemed, what she was wearing?

I'm for offering nothing more, but Maggs jumps in: "She asked... well..."

"Asked what?"

"If Mike would pick her out some books."

"And did you sir?"

"Well, yes..."

I thought he might have been interested in what the books were, but he asks again if we recall what she was wearing: I leave Maggs to fill in the details, fearing I may already have sounded too familiar with Grace Milner, if only because I cannot explain the reasons even to myself, let alone to the rational senses of authority. Maggs remembers the coat and the sable hat, and a soft, tan coloured leather jacket underneath, matching bag, boots.

"Em... God of Small Things, and a collection of poems by Seamus Heaney."

"Sir?"

"The books I chose for her."

He looks at me like I'm an idiot, bids us a patient good evening, then leaves.

He gives the impression of being a slow man, pedantic, eyes like black pebbles, hard, unbreakable. I imagine his story: seen a lot of desensitising depravity and rotting corpses. His outward slowness is practised, meditative, inwardly though he is sharp, calculating, but also in tune with his gut.

When he's gone, Maggs and I find ourselves thrown together in intrigue.

"Mike?"

"Does that mean she's missing?"

"I presume so, or dead."

"Maggs, no!"

"Well... I don't know..."

She looks at me strangely then – just for a moment – and I am reading something in her now that puts me on edge.

"Wait," I ask. "You don't think..."

"What?"

"Well, that I might have had anything to do with... what ever it is, do you?"

Yes. It had crossed her mind.

"Of course not, Mike. No..."

Her double denial comes too quick, too slow, I don't know, and I know I'm imagining her caution, but still, I'm appalled, shattered; I need to be elsewhere suddenly; I need to be alone, away from Maggs' sudden collapse of trust.

I need time to think about this, time to absorb it.

"Em... do you want me in tomorrow?"

She is in Wigan tomorrow, that is if Alan turns up on time, and he seems reliable of late so she does not see why not. She'll ring me if there's a problem with any of that, otherwise she does not need me. I am sorry for this, feel cast off, find myself wanting to be wanted by her. No, that's not true. What I want is to be believed by her, trusted...

I leave her to lock up as usual and we part company. I offer my usual goodbyes but there's a tone in my voice that smacks of pleading – imaginary I know. Yes, I want her to trust in me and I fancy from her tone in reply she is having to think about that, that she is wondering if I might ever have blacked a woman's eye, or worse. And she is wondering what it was in my past I did that was silly? I wish I had explained it better now. Stupidity and insensitivity are more easily forgivable than violence.

Perhaps she might have allowed me that at least.

I walk across town to recover Mavis from the car-park. The shops are shuttering, something alarming in the rattle and slam as they are pulled down. The market traders are hurrying by with crates of stinking cabbages, big unshaven men with fierce, ruddy faces. I imagine them sneering at me. Sex pest. Molester. Weirdo. The shadows within me are leaping out, unsettling me.

Something in the world is changing, turning, pointing at me. I remember those books this morning, those echoes in their titles – The Well-beloved, and Heaney's poems. They seem like harbingers now of something unpleasant.

And Maggs? She's wondering. If it's true Grace is missing, then my infatuation or whatever it was inevitably makes me a suspect. Will she feel inclined to tell the police about it? Would I, in her shoes do the same? And how can something so innocent have become something else so suddenly?

Missing? Or dead?

But, she can't be dead.

Melvyn!

It's always the boyfriend, isn't it? But I saw him only days ago, and he seemed quite unperturbed, hardly like a man who had done something terrible, or was even contemplating it. I would have felt that in him, surely?

Or, as usual, am I being paranoid?

Back at the van I hit the internet – devour all the news outlets. There is nothing. I try to sleep, but lay awake the whole night, haunted by images of her, perhaps lying out in a ditch, cold, dead, violated. Grace! To make matters worse this feverish melodrama is enhanced somewhat by the steady prowling thunder of a police helicopter. Is it my imagination or does it hover all night

over the van, buffeting it with the down-draught.

Before light, the phone is ringing. It's Maggs. I'm ready with my excuses. I cannot bear the thought of sitting in the shop today, if something has happened to Grace.

"Mike? Have you seen the news? She's missing. Missing for a week. It must have been just after that last time we saw her in the shop."

Pause.

"Mike, are you all right?"

"I'm... okay..."

Pause.

"I just wanted to see if you'd heard. Anyway, I'll speak to you later. Take care."

I check the news again online, and the world is different this morning. Grace Milner's face adorns the national tabloids. Missing for a week. Friends and family increasingly concerned. Boyfriend, Melvyn, aged 30, to make an emotional appeal on TV for information leading to her whereabouts.

Boyfriend is actually 33. What else have they got wrong?

All of this sounds a little premature, as if the police have already concluded she is dead. Are they perhaps merely torturing Melvyn, wanting him to crack, to break down and confess like they do in the movies? And if the police do not suspect him, I suspect the press already do because, like I said, it's always the boyfriend, or some other familiar male, isn't it? And stories are myths which, even if not true, we would rather they were because they fit the pattern in our heads, and simplify everything. And it seems even I believe it now, though I have no logical reason for doing so.

Sadly, I note the press would not have been so interested had it been a man who had gone missing. He would have managed at best a single paragraph, for there is no equivalent mythos to be had from the missing man. With a woman though, there are salacious details to be savoured. There are descriptions of underwear. Was the body found naked? Are there signs of sexual activity? Thus do we make front-page pornography out of someone else’s tragedy.

And then there is the bogey man to be hunted and blamed for it.

A search will commence at first light. Lakes, rivers, canals.
Melvyn! Dear God! Even as he'd kicked Mavis' tyres that time, was his memory fresh with the violence he had done to Grace?

No, wait...

There's a hammering on the van that makes the whole place shake. It's the policeman again, and he's not alone. There are two uniforms with him. Faceless, impassive and disappointingly crumpled. I'm puzzled, but eager to help, and invite them in. They are surly and do not bother wiping their feet.

How can I help them?

Internet browsing!

I'm sorry?

Do not underestimate how easily, how inexpensively and how quickly its details can be intercepted now. It's just an idle tap on a computer in the bowels of the machinery of state. Thus it is already known I made a connection between myself and Grace's social media account, and that I did so using spoof details, at a point in time just prior to her disappearance. A proxy browser would have hidden my interest, but I had not thought to use one.

As a matter of course I am much more careful now.

Anyway.

Can I explain my interest in Grace Milner?

This is the first of many questions, but the one most repeated.

I cannot reply at first. I am floored by their sudden and intimate knowledge of my browsing habits. What else do they know? I'm beginning to suspect anything I say will make things sound even more inexplicable. Or embarrassing. Worse however is to come, if I have encouraged it or not, to wit: I have also perused the social media account of one Melvyn Judd. CCTV images also place my vehicle at his place of work. Can I explain any of that?

When you spend most of your life harbouring under a Romantic illusion of the way the world is, it can be a shocking experience when the cold, banal reality breaks in. Still, I cannot speak, cannot gather my thoughts but enter

instead a state of mild catatonia.

Let's be clear: they suspect *me*, not Melvyn. In the case of missing Grace, I am to be the chosen one! I am to be vilified, crucified.

Would I mind coming along to the station, *sir*, for a friendly chat? *Am I not under arrest?* No, just a friendly chat, sir. And would I mind if they had a look around the van while I was gone? Save time, sir. We're sure, this whole thing will be cleared up ever so quickly. Awfully kind, sir.

Mind? How can one mind?

None of this is legal, none of this is "procedure", but the police are pressed for time and money and must, I suppose, employ guile to make ends meet from time to time. To wit: I have apparently signed my own search warrant, duly witnessed by the uniformed officers' activated body-cams.

The rest of the conversation is carried out in a foul smelling little room at the police station. No, I am not under arrest, nor caution, absolutely not, sir. Just helping with enquiries, just a friendly chat, sir. Absolutely. Nothing to worry about.

During the course of their search of my van they find Grace Milner's calling card inside a book that bears her fingerprints. They can process fingerprints so quickly now? Of course they can – the machine does it for them. Is the book hers, sir? And how do I come to be in possession of it? Do I know Grace Milner? What is the nature of our relationship?

At this point I make a half hearted comment, a weak joke about needing a solicitor, though I do not know one. Do the police not offer them free of charge? How does this work? But no offer is forthcoming. Indeed the tone hardens somewhat. It is, after all, just a friendly chat, and surely I do not want this to go on all day by making it more formal. But a red light on the box indicates the formality of a tape running. All these things I glimpse now as if through a fog, and selectively, as they come looming out at me. And I kick myself for my submissiveness and my naivety.

I can make no sense of it, but all the while I have the feeling I am being played for a fool. Apart from speeding tickets, this is my first encounter with the police, with the inside of their machinery. I do not know how to behave with them for my own protection. I do not even realise protection is sometimes needed. This is about process and results, whether they be the correct ones or not – that's someone else's problem, most immediately mine.

He is not an aggressive man, the policeman, not a bully. He is professionally polite. There is tea, coffee. I decline both.

His name is Seacombe. Detective Inspector. I imagine a man of such rank must have a busy time of it, lots of things to investigate, all at the same time, that he will delegate things of lesser import to his subordinates. On this basis, the fact he is interviewing me does not bode well.

So... the calling card with Grace's name and address on it, Grace who is now missing... or dead:

Can you explain it, Mr Garatt?

I try to take a hold of myself, to find the words.

Pull yourself together, Mike.

Fuck's sake, wake up!

Deep breath.

I had borrowed a book from the shop. Yes, it was one of the books Grace had donated. I am fond of the author. Yes, I often borrow books from the shop. Yes, it is permitted. When I was reading it, the card had fallen out. I was curious. I have no social media presence of my own, so invented one because I wanted to avoid junk mail and targeted advertising. Has he never done that himself? Seacombe evades the question, reverts to his monotonous line, looking for cracks in me. There are many but he is looking in all the wrong places.

No, I do not know Grace Milner other than as an occasional face in the shop. An attractive woman, don't you think? Yes. And I am a single man. Yes. But I am also old enough to be her father. I'm aware the last response is naive, that many men of my age take an interest in young girls.

Why did I not mention any of this last night?

Because I was afraid to admit a link between myself and a woman whom I presumed from his tone to be now missing or dead. And I was embarrassed.

Very well, let's move on to your visit to her boyfriend.

I was in Blackpool on other business, and I remembered the boyfriend worked

at a dealership. His account was, after all, part self advertisement. Thus on impulse I visited the used supercar salesroom where he works in order to investigate the possibility of trading my car in for a Maserati.

Seacombe is not convinced by the latter, which I rather take as an insult. I assure him I can afford a Maserati, though hesitate to add it would require the advance on a sizeable portion of my life savings.

Seacombe again, same old line: Following my last reported sighting of her in the shop, had I ever spoken to Grace Milner? Had I ever visited her home?

No I had not.

He requests my phone – saves time sir – and my continuing patience. I wonder if they have turned up the journal yet, if stubby fingers are following it, line by line, smirking over my innermost secrets. I am protective about the journal, more protective than my phone which I now give up easily, presumably so they can clone it. And good luck with that. I have nothing on my phone and the only person who rings me on it these days is Maggs. But the journal contains so many wry observations, so many impressions of other people. Maggs. Lesley. Alan.

Rape is an awful violation. A man cannot fully imagine it, but I have tried – say an ape of a man shoving his dick up my anus and depositing his filthy seed inside of me. Thinking of my journal in police evidence puts me as close to such defilement as I fancy is possible. I shall have to break out a new one, recount the details from the beginning if only to see what I am missing here.

And finally, after the longest day of my life, the policeman releases me back into the very late of night, and without a ride home, hands me my belongings in a plastic bag, thanks me for my time, tells me he will be in touch if he needs anything else.

They've found her, I ask? She's turned up, dazed and confused somewhere?

No, she has not been found. Grace is still missing.

Do they still suspect me of involvement?

He does not answer directly but tells me they would have retained my passport had they not already noted it has expired. He may be joking, I don't know. Otherwise it seems unnecessary he should tell me this, unless it is a warning of some sort, that although my story holds together, the threads are weak and in the absence of anyone else more likely, I am still suspected of

violence. I don't know, so much of this is vague and ambiguous. They know where I live and are now simply waiting for a body to turn up before they take things any further. They can do no more and are in any case busy with other things.

I think then of all the gross miscarriages of justice, the blind rapacity of the machine in its haste to convict with minimal resource and only cursory attention to detail. I think of the stench of that little room, a mixture of the sweat, flatulence and fear of previous interviewees. Have I the means to subvert such a calamity as that? How much do solicitors cost? Or shall Mavis and I just go and do our Thelma and Louise thing right away?

Tonight!

Shall we?

Chapter Eleven

There is a car outside my home when I arrive back by taxi. I'm thinking it's a plain police-car, sent to watch me, to catch me out, perhaps with Grace's remains in a suitcase.

Not funny, Mike.

But as I pass, a young man emerges with an iPad, camera pointing, its light painful to my eyes. He is jabbering, or at least I am so tired and confused by the day's events I do not at first realise he is questioning me. He's what? A journalist? I don't know. All I see is the light, stabbing, imagine my face in the camera, imagine it online later, prejudicially edited to be picked up by the ghouls – eternal stirrers of shit, hurlers of hurt, whereby anyone can be made to look stupid, or guilty.

I don't remember speaking to him, only turning my eyes away from the light as if ashamed of it. I note how the pad covers his face while he trains its greedy eye on mine. Privacy, like at the police-station, is a one way mirror. They see me bare and squirming, but I don't see them. It is the ultimate power differential, the ultimate violation of dignity.

He follows me up the garden path, another violation. As a child, I played cricket on these lawns with my aunt and uncle. The memories are part of my existential barricade, they are the neat little softly-inlaid box that contains the treasure of my innocence. There is not much left of it now, I know, and what little there is this creature is contaminating.

"Please go away. I have nothing to say to you."

Inside the van I turn to the news, to the TV, to the Internet, scour it for worms. There is no word of the press conference and Melvyn's emotional appeal. Instead I learn a man has been arrested in connection with the disappearance of Grace Milner. He is 57, an unemployed loner with a record of mental illness.

So they've caught someone! The bastard. Thank goodness! Why did Seacombe not say? I wonder who he is, what lowlife, and I wonder if he has confessed! But then I realise it's me they are talking about and I feel guilty at how for a moment I was relieved to think I might be off the hook, when the fact of the matter is Grace Milner is still missing.

I read back that description of myself. It is not exactly untruthful, except for the arrested bit, which could be forgiven as merely slovenly reporting. But it's not a flattering portrait, is it? The facts are spun in such a way even I would believe myself capable of a girl's murder. It's the mental illness that does it, like the mark of Cain, a blanket term covering everything from mild anxiety and depression to schizophrenia – though how they found out about that I don't know. I had thought medical information was sacrosanct, even from casual police scrutiny.

But that sort of information could only have come from the police, leaked by the police! Have the press also got my name? Well, obviously they have if there's a reporter camped outside my home. I suppose it does not take much to bring such creatures running. There will have been police vehicles at my door all day. Blue tape perhaps. People in forensic overalls and death masks nosing among my things?

Hardly discreet.

The reporter is banging on the door now. Is there anything I want to say to him regarding the disappearance of Grace Milner? Yes, I want to tell him to fuck off. He peeps through the letter box. I stick a piece of tape over it. Should I call the police to get rid of him? Perhaps I should, but after the day I've had I would rather not deal with them again for a while. Yet I feel vulnerable in the van – no stairs to climb to gain sanctuary in altitude, free from predators. I see his face at the big window now at the front of the van. His rudeness is outrageous, the light from his iPad probing into my privacy, capturing every detail for others to crow over.

Loser.

Unemployed.

Mental illness.

Loner.

I draw the curtains, attempt to rest, but imagine him out there all night. It brings to mind a novel by William Hope Hodgson: The House on the Borderland (1906), and the hero's lonely night-time vigil in an old house in the wilderness. He is on the borders of something vile, besieged by malevolent supernatural creatures he calls "swine things".

Thus I imagine Hodgeson's swine things sniffing around the van, imagine them sending their little probing snouts, like cameras, through the cracks,

searching for me. I am on the borderlands of barbarism, a world stripped of imagination, of decency. And all we have left is this broken machine, an unclean thing that sputters rationality but has been left to go rusty, unrepaired, spewing oil and filth in all directions and entirely careless of whom it mangles in its infernal and arcane processes.

All right, I know. This is overblown. I did not take redundancy from the foundry at all well. Stress will trigger bouts of obsessive behaviour, also bizarre imaginings and borderline paranoia. I can avoid medication, but only by avoiding stress, which is partly why I choose not to work again, why I immerse myself in the alternate reality of books, because a characteristic of the times we live in is there is no work at all these days that is in any way free of outrageous indignity, and dehumanisation. We are all the victims of Taylorism now, the machine wanting to own you for minimum wage, and if we persist in our cravings for grace, love, and beauty, it will only make us ill.

We find its traces only in books now, and then as sad memories piled with dust.

There is at length a lull in the happenings beyond the van, and I may even have dozed a little, but by morning discover the swine things have multiplied. There is a truck emblazoned with the logo of an obscure satellite news channel, and several other vehicles, figures at the garden gate, watching, waiting. At least they are not pressed up against the van.

I fear to breathe in case it ruffles the curtains and the movement sets off a frenzy of ferocious baying. I fear to move in case the sound triggers yapping, or whatever sound it is the swine things make. But I must move. I need to use the toilet. I need to eat.

I gather courage and ring the number on the policeman's card. Seacombe answers, sounds tired, sounds "this had better be good" kind of weary.

"There are reporters and a TV crew camped outside my door."

He sounds amused: "How inconvenient for you Mr Garett."

"What am I supposed to do?"

It is not his concern, though he is generous enough to offer assurances they will most likely grow bored and drift away.

I do not share his optimism.

"Can't they be moved on... or something?"

So long as they are not causing an obstruction, or trespassing on my property, blah-di blah-di blah, he has no reason to act. Free country, and all that. But he will ask that a patrol car be sent at some point to ensure order is being kept. I can tell from his tone it will be unwise for me to hold my breath.

'Any news on Grace?'

'I'm afraid I can't say, Mr Garett. Is there anything more you want to tell us?'

'No.'

So. I'm on my own. I think about this for a time, rummage deep in memory for my business head, for the old corporate Mike Garett, and prepare a statement as if about to present to the Head of Sales an accounting of my deeds. And if I could misdirect him, as I often did, I can perhaps also misdirect a bunch of baying swine things.

But walking out to meet them is a frightening experience, conscious of how every move, every blink, every facial tick is captured on a battery of stuttering cameras and mobile devices, to be uploaded for eternity, my image thereafter shat upon by all the shadow creatures, the vampires, the wolves, the banshees. Even before I have emerged fully from the van, there is an incoherent baying that has my heart in my throat.

There is something unreal about it.

Have I died and gone to hell?

I am familiar enough with such scenes from the TV news and the dramas of course, reporters baying after the misdeeds of politicians and other celebrities. But such a reception, such media interest in *me*, and so suddenly, seems a little disproportionate. I am become myth, I suppose. I am Demeter, stealer and molester of fair Persephone. I am become fiction. And in the internet age, almost anything can trigger a frenzy, and for no reason.

In short, I have gone viral.

Well done, Mike…

I pause at the gate in their midst. They seem at least respectful of the boundary between us, unlike that brazen low-life last night, a local hack with

dreams of tabloid stardom. I hear only snatched phrases, a mad jumble of shouted nonsense coming at me from a wide arc.

I try a long pause, like for a two minute's Armistice silence. It calms them down. Finally they shut up.

I have a short statement to read, then I'd appreciate it if you'd move away from my home, because I find your presence here intimidating.

Yesterday I was invited to answer questions by the police in connection with the disappearance of Grace Milner. I do not know Grace Milner, but the police believed I may have information that might shed light on their enquiries. Contrary to misleading reports in the press and online yesterday I was at no point under arrest on suspicion of involvement in her disappearance.

I sincerely hope Grace is found alive and well, and urge anyone with any knowledge of her whereabouts to come forward.

Thank you.

Response:

Why did the police search your van, Mr Garatt?

Is it true they found pornography on your computer?

Is it true you were stalking Grace Milner online?

Conclusion: they are not interested in statements, in information, in facts, only in provoking a reaction, and they will cut to the frame that makes me look most stupid or the most guilty.

Stalking? At a pinch, yes, I suppose I was. A police snitch must have told them that. Pornography? That was a guess. And no there is no pornography on my computer. It will take more than that to do it for me these days. I don't say any of this, of course. I merely think it.

The cacophony of sound increases to a fever pitch, lesser swine things begin jostling for position. The more senior and assertive resist with elbows. All of this puts pressure on the gate, on the posts, on the little white picket fence I once spent a childhood summer holiday sanding down and painting. It bows. There is the crack of splintering wood and the fence is down, swine things are stumbling into the borders, trampling the fledgling snowdrops my aunt

planted there. I am appalled. I had been looking forward to seeing them open as a reminder of her.

It is perhaps another kind of omen.

I back away, retire to the van, then have the disorienting experience of seeing myself from outside my body on the TV.

I look weird.

I look shifty.

I look guilty.

I look... stupid.

There is food in the van for a few days. I find earplugs, shove them in, turn the TV off, apply tape to all the gaps in the curtains, then make soup.

Chapter Twelve

Phone: Maggs.

I do not answer. I mean, how the hell can I come to the shop today? I cannot leave the van until this herd of swine-things goes away in case they see me and launch my face once more online to be the butt of ridicule and filth. I feel utterly defiled, bewildered, disorientated.

Calm down, Mike.

Ten minutes. Phone again. Maggs.

All right, dammit. Answer!

"Ah, Maggs. Yes... sorry look, I'm a bit tied up at the moment."

"I can see that. Your little van was on Breakfast News, and your face is all over Youtube."

"What? So soon?"

"All you have to do is type Grace Milner into the search box. What's going on?"

Indeed, what? Shall I give her the existential answer? Or the more prosaic? Prosaic is best, I think, especially since I'm still trying to get a handle on the existential.

"Well, top and bottom the police rather hoped I could help further their enquiries, then decided I couldn't. In the mean time they were a little indiscreet with the press and now I'm besieged in the van by a pack of baying swine things who seem rather more hopeful of extracting a confession, or just making me look idiotic which, as far as they're concerned, counts as equally entertaining."

"They're saying you were arrested."

"No. I was invited for a chat – at least that's how the police put it. I was there all day. I'm afraid they rather took advantage of me, Maggs. Searched the van and everything while I was gone. Turned up that book she brought in, with her fingerprints all over it, and mine of course."

"Oh, Mike..."

"So... em... how are things at the shop?"

"Never mind the shop. Are there still cameras outside your place?"

"Last time I looked, yes. I've drawn all the curtains and taped them shut."

"You're sitting in the dark?"

"I have electric lights, Maggs. The van's not that basic."

"No, of course... silly of me. Still, it sounds awful. Can't the police do anything?"

"Apparently not. And talking of the police it's probably best to assume they're listening to my phone, or at least recording it... or something... maybe the press too for that matter, since the twain seem to be symbiotically linked. So, perhaps it's best if anyone who knows me keeps their distance for a bit. You don't want these bastards camped outside your house as well."

Maggs gives an impatient sigh. Is she cross with me?

"Don't be absurd, Mike."

"Well, you never know these days, and I mean... this is such a terrible mess and I wouldn't want you getting... you know?... dragged into it or anything."

What I mean is Maggs has enough problems of her own.

"I think I can look after myself," she says, something spiky in her tone. Have I offended her? I think I have. Oh, Lord. I need all the friends I can get. And right now I have... well, Maggs.

"You have to get out of there," she says. "Is there nowhere else you can go? Friend? Relative?"

"I should probably stay put, actually. I don't want anyone thinking I have anything to hide." Of course what I actually mean is I'm too scared to move.

"They've already decided you're guilty. I'm sorry to have to tell you but you're front page in the red-tops as well."

"What?"

The gates of Hell have now surely opened and I have fallen through, never to be seen again.

"Don't worry, it's not a terribly good photograph. Your own mother wouldn't recognise you from that, and they've left the glowing red eyes in, I presume, to make you look evil."

Apologies in advance: "The fucking,... *bastards!*..."

I take the following pause to imply she does not approve of my language. "Em... sorry, Maggs."

"You're forgiven under the circumstances. Look, meet me in the coffee shop at Freshways Supermarket in an hour."

"But... I'm trapped. I can't get out of here."

"Yes you can. It's easy. You pack a bag, some clothes and stuff, whatever you cannot live without. Then paint on a smile and you walk out. You put the bag in your car, and you drive away. Fast as you like."

Whatever I cannot live without?

"But they'll just follow me like... like a pack of hounds."

"Then lose them. Is that car of yours a sports car or not? And can you handle it, or do you just putter around in it like a little old man all the time?"

"Of course I can handle it!"

"Good. Then prove it. One hour."

My response is pure ego of course. I've no idea if I can handle it or not, and yes, all right, I do usually just putter around in it like a little old man. All of the time.

But what about that challenging tone in Maggs' voice? It quite took my breath away. Is it the bonkbuster she's been reading? But surely the women in those stories are the ones taking the whip, not giving it. Maggs a dominatrix? She does display certain tendencies of course, but can one be both dominatrix and bruised submissive at the same time?

We can be many things Mike, and yes, all at the same time. The former is

role-play. The latter is real and unfortunate circumstance.

I pack a suitcase, and my walking sack, discover I have everything of value contained in my wallet, my phone and my laptop. The rest is online and can be accessed from anywhere. I decide on midday for my escape, which gives me an hour to shake the swine things off, meet up with Maggs at Freshways across town, and all without trailing the heat behind me.

The heat?

Apparently, Mike, yes.

Chapter Thirteen

I take a breath, crack open the van door and step outside. The sun is shining. After the dimly lit interior of the van it hurts my eyes, leaves me disorientated. Birds are singing. And all the swine things have gone. I don't understand this but, naturally, waste little time thinking about it.

"They found a body," she says. Maggs, I mean.

But this is later when I find her in the coffee shop after an uneventful drive across town. I do not seek her out straight away. I'm early, so make a beeline for the phone department and buy myself a cheap pay as you go burner – as they say in the movies. I use it to ring the farm in the Dales, book myself a bolt hole for a few weeks. Then I go to the cafeteria.

Maggs is waiting, creamy trench-coat, hair up like Tippi Hedren, chin balancing on one hand while she stirs her coffee with the other. She sees me, stands at my approach takes two steps forward, and hugs me.

I am lost in her garden, I mean in Le Jardin, and in the warmth and the clean, steady, freshly made bed feel of her. (freshly made bed, Mike?) I sit, speechless at so warm a reception, feel myself washed half way clean and human again, then am immediately knocked sideways by the newspaper on the table she has borrowed from the rack, and from which my image stares out at the world, evil eyes and all. It's appalling. And... God, am I really so ugly as that?

She's smiling. "With all of this going on you still took time to put on a tie and cuff-links?"

My world has collapsed, my life is over, and she can joke? Well, why not? Come on, Mike, give it back: "Em... no sense in letting appearances go, Maggs."

"Ordinarily not, but it does rather draw attention in this day and age. Especially in Middleton. You look like male escort."

"At my age?" I feel a little frisson at the thought. Male escort? To Maggs? It's not a career choice to which I am well suited, however. I slide off the tie, undo my top button. "There, now I am invisible."

"Hardly. Don't you own a pair of jeans?"

"Certainly not!"

She laughs at me laughing at myself. "You lost the swine-things, then?"

"Well, I'd like to be telling you a tale of demon driving, but actually, there was no one there by lunch time, so I just drove out as normal. Puttered over here like a little old man."

And that's when she tells me they found a body, suggests perhaps the press were more interested in the body than old man Mike Garatt hiding in his mouldy van. In spite of appearances, we are both a little nervous, jittery at the strangeness, a little giddy with it all. But of course foremost in my mind at that moment is:

"They've found Grace?"

"No. Some other poor woman – a dog walker, down by the canal. They think she slipped, drowned. It's simply awful."

"But... how does news like that travel so fast? That can't be more than an hour old."

"Social media. You know? Twitter and all that? #News #Middleton #missingwoman."

"Ah... okay."

"But, Mike, are you all right? Let me get you a coffee."

Am I all right? I consider the question. Sitting there, free from imprisonment in the van, I'm not feeling too bad at all. Well... Grace is still missing and some poor woman has drowned in the canal, which is hardly good news. And if not feeling exactly good about any of that I am at least feeling stronger in myself and clearer in my head than I would have thought likely this time yesterday – I mean sitting in that small room, sweating under Seacombe's pedantic questioning. It's Maggs then... being with Maggs. She simply has a way of making you want to pull your socks up. You want to live up to her.

She returns with coffee.

"There. Very strong and very hot, but otherwise not all that great, I'm afraid."

"Thanks. But shouldn't you be working? I thought you were in Wigan today."

"That was yesterday. I've been collecting donated stock from Southport this morning. I'm just on my way into town with it now."

"Anything interesting?"

"Forget the shop, you need to focus."

"No, I need to escape into something else and stop thinking. And the shop has always done that for me. Stops me thinking. Dwelling. I mean all those books, they just suck the angst right out of me."

Ah... small revelation right there, Mike.

"All right," she says. "But no. Nothing interesting. Nothing you'd approve of, anyway. But it'll sell. Look, you can't go back to the van. The newspapers will be hopping mad you've escaped. You're public enemy number one. I mean if they could pin this drowning on you as well they'd do it. They'll be howling round your door again any time."

I drop my head into my hands, massage my forehead, try to rally my forces against this rout by column after column of the absurd. "I'll be okay. I've booked myself into a little place in the Dales for a bit. It's quiet up there. I'll stay until all the fuss dies down or Grace turns up – one way or the other."

"That sounds good. I was worried. That van of yours seems awfully vulnerable. You know what people are like once they get to know a face. For now you're besieged by the press, but next it'll be the trolls."

I shudder at the thought. It won't take much for half the low-lifes in Middleton to work out where I live now. And it takes very little these days for people to feel justified in throwing stones at the innocent, both verbally and literally.

"I haven't exactly been described in glowing terms, have I? Mike Garatt, unemployed loner with glowing red eyes, and a nutter to boot. Even I thought I was guilty, reading that description."

"Did they make that up?" she asks. "I mean... the mental illness thing?"

I hesitate to reply. I know I'm guilty of fabricating an identity, but Maggs' good opinion is important to me. And mental health is still something of a taboo isn't it? But what the hell, it's not like she can sack me for it:

"When I got the chop from the foundry I went through a period of depression, anxiety, you know? I'd been there for ever, and it's a shock when you realise

nothing is safe or secure any more. It shook me up a little. It's why I live in books now. I find them calming. They paint a picture of the way things could be, if only at times by more accurately describing how they really are."

"I know. I feel the same way... about books."

"It was disturbing, how the police would know about it so quickly – the depression I mean. It's in my medical records, I suppose, though I didn't labour it with the doc. Found him useless to be honest. Just handed me some pills. It didn't come up in the interview with Seacombe – so it's even more disturbing they'd pass it onto those... swine things,..."

"Perhaps the police didn't know, perhaps the swine things just invented it. So many of us have mental health issues, these days. So it's easy to score a bull's eye without really trying." She draws a blister pack from her handbag. Citalopram. She mistakes my surprise for confusion, begins to explain. "They're for..."

"I know what they're for. That's what the doc gave me."

"So. You see? You're not the only Cuckoo around here."

"But Maggs, I'm so sorry. I'd no idea. You always seem so calm... so confident."

"Really? Well... I used to be like that. Now it's mostly medicated. Been on them for a year. Time I was coming off them I think, but things being what they are... I mean at home... it's all a bit... hectic. Unsettling. You know?"

There's a pause while this sinks in. Then the silence veers into the awkward, so she redirects it, changes the subject: "Nice one, by the way. Swine things. William Hope Hodgson? House on the Borderland?"

"Yes. You've read it?"

"Wrote a dissertation on early twentieth century horror. He was one of my sources."

"You did literature?" I'm impressed. Puzzled. Why am I only finding this out about her now? Because you never make conversation, Mike. You just respond to questioning. Usually in monosyllables.

"And creative writing," she adds. The latter is something of an afterthought, as if she'd forgotten.

"But... if you'll pardon my asking, Maggs... what are you doing managing a bunch of run-down charity shops?"

"Instead of writing a novel you mean? Like you?"

The sarcasm is obvious, but comes with a twist of wry humour. "All right, fair enough."

She sighs. "Have you never thought that if there's any Romance left at all in England, it's in places like Donnegans now? And I don't mean for the literary types, for the tweed jackets like you who hang around the poetry section. I run it for the tired old ladies in their drab hand-me-downs, and the kids in their far-eastern sweat-shop threads. I run it for those who like the thrillers, the chick-lit, and yes, the bonk-busters too, and... all right the highbrow stuff as well, because how else would it survive in the public eye nowadays?

"There's no library in town any more. You know that. They shut it years ago. We're the last place people can get their reading on the cheap. I do it for the people who can afford two pounds, buy one get one free, but wouldn't dream of paying a tenner for a new book any more because they need that money for food. So, two for two pounds it is, because I want them to read. If we stop reading, Mike, if we lose that connection with the stories that ground us, then we have no future, other than what the machine is feeding us, which is personified by the comments section of any online source, and the crass tabloid headlines of course. And if all I have in order to prevent that from happening is an army of unpaid, unreliable and mostly bonkers volunteers, the walking wounded of a society on its uppers... then so be it."

I have to think about all of this. What she said was very eloquent, and meaningful, and beautiful, but of course now is not the time to get into it. More and more, the mystery of Maggs intrigues me, but mostly I feel alarm at her situation, that one so precious and motivated can face daily a risk to her health and well being, simply by being tied to a man who hits her.

But no, there's no time to dwell on it.

From the corner of my eye, I note a uniform under a hi-vis jacket. Traffic cop. He's buying coffee, looks around for somewhere to sit. I freeze. Maggs observes as beads of sweat begin to prickle my forehead. I note among all the hardware he's attached to is a taser and a body-cam. Is the camera networked? Is the machine reading faces. Will it beep an alert in his ear? Authorise the use of force? Is it already telling him to 'shoot the bastard'? All these things are technically feasible, so it's as well to assume the possibility.

Paranoid, I know. Not altogether rational either, am I? But when under duress, it's as well to pay as much heed to gut instinct as to one's rational senses, and my gut's telling me to disappear.

I'm about to draw back my chair, ready to slink away, but Maggs lays a hand on my sleeve, and I no longer feel the cop's presence. I see only her hand, feel its gentle pressure, the shape of it, the perfect polished pink ellipsoids of her nails. It's inexplicably calming.

"Take it easy. He's just on his break."

Chapter Fourteen

So, we wait a while in silence, wait for the cop to take his seat. Another couple gets up and walks out, we follow. I realise I am still attached to Maggs. She has slipped her arm through mine, though whether this is to steady me, steer me, or make us look like a couple I don't know. The feeling is expansive, rewarding – to be a couple with Maggs!

I've felt this before, I think, or did I dream it? She steers me into the supermarket, gathers up a basket and we proceed to saunter. I feel safe, invisible, for surely if anyone is looking our way now they are looking at her.

"I really had nothing to do with any of this," I tell her. "This infatuation with Grace, this whole thing, it was more a... a memory of something beautiful, something desirable I had once. But it wasn't her. It was... more complicated..."

Maggs reaches for a bottle of washing up liquid, considers it for a moment, puts it back. "I know. I'm not stupid. I get it. It was Romantic with a capital 'R'. So what happened? They found a book you said?"

"I took it home, you know? the one she'd brought in, and a card dropped out with her details on it, and I was curious, that's all. I looked her up online. I'd no idea we could be detected so easily doing that, and though it was entirely innocent, I suppose under the circumstances it might have looked suspicious. But you do believe me?"

"Would I be here if I didn't? I know you, Mike. You'd never hurt anyone. A girl's only to say boo and you'd run a mile."

"Eh?"

"It was meant as a compliment. Look, you're... well... you're very submissive. You're not a... you're not a predatory kind of man. Not much of a wolf, are you."

Predator? I would like to think not, ditto 'wolf', but 'Submissive?' Heavens, that sounds much worse.

She contemplates a bottle of shampoo, wrinkles her nose at it. "I ring you up at all times of day and night, because there's yet another *emergency* at our worthless little bookshop, another hole that needs plugging. So why do I call you?"

"Because I'm the only one who answers the 'phone'?"

"Yes. You're the least evasive and the most obliging. And totally reliable. An employer's dream."

"The fact I'm not paid also helps."

"Of course. But soon all employees will be unpaid. Slavery is the next logical step."

"Okay, but I warn you there may be reasons for my submissiveness, things that relate to my mental illness, and it could be that someone has only to light my fuse, and it's no more Mr. Nice-guy."

She resists my half hearted effort at untangling my arm from hers, pulls me closer, gives an admonishing tug. "Oh, please! Don't try to play the bad-ass with me. I'm married to one. And I can tell the difference. But... you're saying Grace Milner left you her address in that book?"

"Well, not exactly. I'm not sure. Perhaps it was just a coincidence."

"Maybe not. I saw the way she looked at you. She was definitely interested in you in some way."

"Interested? You're saying she might have a thing for older men?"

"Well... as vulgar as that sounds, I suppose it's marginally better than the odious little poseur she was actually going out with."

"You know about him?"

"Oh, I found all that social media stuff as well this morning, as soon as her name popped up in my news-feed. So I searched for her, and found him as well."

"You seem very well up with that sort of thing – I presume you used an alias or something? A spoof ID?"

"Of course." She smiles mysteriously. "Why? Have you tried looking me up as well, Mike?"

I'm blushing. "No. Naturally, I'd have no reason to do that. But you should be careful. That's how I got into this mess."

"Now you're being paranoid. Anyway, her sites have all been blocked now. She was getting comments... weird things, incoherent, sentimental, some of it sexual, dark. I don't know, Mike, you go online and read all this stuff that spews out of people's heads and you realise we're a different species to the one I've always believed we were. We really are disgusting creatures, all of us just painted over with this thin veneer. It's only to get the upper hand and we're finished. And it's only books now that provide the voice of reason, and wisdom, because the books come from somewhere else – a different part of us."

"I know. When I looked she had hardly any followers. Now people think she's dead she becomes popular of a sudden. And there's no sense to it. There's a message in that for all of us. She taught literature, you know?"

"Yes, me too, until recently."

"You taught as well?"

"Yes." She smiles, enigmatic, drops a packet of condoms in the basket, leaves them to simmer there for a while, smiles at my embarrassment, takes them out again. "Oh, Mike, you really are such a prude."

"No, just embarrassed when I'm around women."

She's about to examine a toothbrush but hesitates. "Oh?... now that's interesting." She blushes. "Sorry for teasing. So... you'll be going away for a bit?"

"Yes."

"Far?"

"A few hours' drive. But I was wondering about nipping into the shop first, if that's okay."

"Why would you want to do that?"

"Grace donated another book. Do you remember? Dylan Thomas. Miscellany One."

"I think I saw it in the back room. You want it? Why?"

"I think she might have written something in it."

"Ah... how enigmatic!"

"I'm not sure why, or what exactly but if she did, then I know where to look."

"Well, it's a risk, going into town right now."

"I'll wear a hat... or something."

"A beard might help… but not a hat." She thinks for a moment, gathers courage, takes a breath. "You offered me a sofa. Remember?"

"Yes."

"That was very kind of you. I was a bit stand-offish at the time, and I'm sorry about that. To tell you the truth I was a bit surprised."

"I didn't mean anything other than...

"I know, and... I could use a sofa right now. Tonight, actually. Friday night you see? Sundays are for remorse. But Fridays and Saturdays have become, shall we say a little volatile, lately?"

"He's away in the week? Home weekends? That's when he drinks?"

"Travels with his job, yes. He drinks all the time, just drinks more at the weekend. Mike... please don't get the wrong idea. I'm not looking for an affair... or anything."

"I know. You said. And... really Maggs, I'm flattered you would consider that even a remote possibility."

Dimples appear under her cheekbones, but she resists the full smile, places some hand-cream in the basket and some lip-balm. "You know... you can be very charming. But I'm never sure if you mean it, or if you're just being your usual remote and inscrutable self."

"Remote? Inscrutable?"

"Hard to know you."

"You just said you knew me very well."

"I know some of your masks, that's all. Mostly you hide behind this façade of

gentlemanly erudition and sartorial elegance – and nicely done by the way. You try to act a bit dim sometimes as well, but I can see through that. Heaven knows what you're really like."

"Erudite and stylish? I'll settle for that. Thank you."

"Could be worse, I suppose. Anyway, it'll just be for the weekend, if that's all right. I can come to you after work, bring the book with me."

"Okay. There's another room, actually. I'll ask for it to be made up for you. There's no way you're sleeping on a couch."

"That's very kind, thank you. So, it's a definite yes?"

"Of course... yes."

"Just one more thing." She takes down a bottle of Malt Whisky, shows me the label. "Do you drink, Mike?"

And I'm thinking: Seventy quid for a bottle of Malt? "Drink?" Not at that price. Sadly, though, I know what she means. "No, Maggs, I don't drink."

She sets the bottle back. "That's fine then."

"But I am suspected of rape and murder which many would consider to be much worse."

"I know, but that's all nonsense."

Her trust is restored then, and it means a lot. It inches me ever so slightly back into the world. "Thank you."

It's a pity I've struggled to read Maggs' mind like I claim to be able to read everyone else's, or I would have seen more of this coming. I realise perhaps she is deliberately evasive, or her mask is strong, more the result of guile than unconscious belief in it. That's her marriage, I suppose, twenty years or so pretending to be one thing in order to compromise and get along with an uncompromising man, when she was really wanting something else for herself entirely.

And me? What was I wanting? And what did I get instead that I'm constantly trying to hide from in this disguise of erudition and sartorial style, as she put it? I suppose it's just myself – the lone sense of my self in a world that's entirely void of grace now. But to cure that you don't do it by running away.

You do it by gathering people to you and getting involved in the sheer unruly mess of them, and that's just not in my nature, is it?

"You know... Maggs... you could... leave him?"

She forgives me with a smile – crisp, politely dismissive – drops her hand from my arm, hides it in her pocket, casts me adrift as if I have sinned.

"Not that simple, Mike."

Chapter Fifteen

I ask if she will buy a cheap phone, then give her my new number to put in it, and I tell her the location of the farm. I tell her not to bring her old phone with her because they can be tracked by the machinery, and it seems such information can then be bought by anyone with an interest and the right connections – and especially swine-things. Once upon a time you could eliminate the risk by removing the battery, but many batteries are now fixed. I hesitate to suggest the reason why. I also hesitate to suggest as an alternative she use a metal tin as a Faraday cage – a Romney's Kendal Mint Cake tin for example – in case she thinks I am insane. Instead, she tells me I am paranoid, but beyond that does not argue and agrees to my terms.

Yes, all right, I do keep mine in a tin these days, and swap out the sim regularly, change my number. And if that sounds awkward for you, then your life is already too complicated.

Mavis' number plate can be tracked too, of course, by cameras on the main routes and the bigger intersections, cameras that are also connected to the machine. So I use a marker pen to alter the "V" in her registration, make it look more like a "W" and for good measure I interlink the “II” to make it look like an “H”. There is such a registration – the government web site tells me it belongs to a Ford Escort.

As yet cameras aren't smart enough to tell the difference, as I found out when I was fined for crossing the Dartford Bridge without paying, on a day when I'd been nowhere near it, and not surprising since it's about two hundred miles from Middleton. They can sometimes be a bit myopic, the cameras, the machinery behind them pedantic in the sense of its own infallibility, and your assumed guilt. The penalty notice drops through the post and becomes your problem, even though the picture of the vehicle clearly shows the miscreant to be a Ford Escort and not an ageing little Japanese Roadster.

Call it revenge, then. Best served cold of course. There is a risk of prosecution, but nothing worse than I am already attempting to evade.

Anyway, once I get off the A59, the North and the Dales in particular are pretty much an open book still. Yes, I'm aware Maggs is right, and I'm beginning to sound paranoid but I can't help it. You might even say I have no choice these days.

I'm at the cabin by mid-afternoon. The sky above the green of the dale is steely and mysterious, feeling a little like snow. There is a sense of having

escaped, abandoned the known world, even the machinery and its absurd machinations, but there's no point in dwelling on any of it.

The cabin is lukewarm, but still welcoming in its scent of pine and books. I collect wood from the shelter, and get the burner going.

How different would things have been if I had married Laura or Sandra? We'd be kid deep by now, kids in their twenties, kids perhaps with kids of their own.

Grandpa Mike? Imagine that!

Not helpful...

Focus, focus...

I would still have been potted at the foundry, but I'd be secure somewhere with my lady, or at least one of them, or I hope just one of them... cosy in a little house. The bookshop might still have featured in my path, but I might have avoided this particular pass, this dubious celebrity. Or would I have fallen for Grace anyway? Is Grace not more a serial pathology than a path to wholeness? And would Laura/Sandra have understood the root of it to lie in my Romantic vision as easily as Maggs seems to do? Would that version of my life have worked out with only greater hurt even than this one? One can never tell, and it's pointless to outguess fate.

It's snowing as the light goes, to be taken over within the cabin by the flickering amber of the burner. I'm worrying about Maggs on the snowy roads. It will be inches deep at this rate, long before she's due, much safer for her to stay at home and I would advise her to change her plans but there's no signal here. The way is set.

I'm also wrong... she's better anywhere than at home with a man who hits her.

Why is it when a woman enters marriage, the assaults upon her are rendered invisible, unaccountable? What is it about the muse that lures a man to his mate, then skips out to some other fey beauty, leaving him to rage like a simpleton? No, gender politics are not my bag. I'm too old fashioned to fathom them – better sticking to the imagined perfection and divinity of womanhood while steadfastly having nothing to do with its more fleshy reality, for fear of getting burned.

Again.

I know, Pygmalion made a dreadful hash of all that, and it looks like I'm getting my comeuppance as well. Aphrodite is very cross with me indeed for past sins. It just seems pointless pursuing normal relations when I find real women so singularly unattractive these days, or at least barely worth the effort. Is it possible to blossom into homosexuality in one's later life, I wonder? It might have been a thing worth exploring except I find the company of men, in the main, equally tiresome

Oh, where is she?

This part of the world can be a devil in poor weather.

I have that wall of books for distraction, but all of them are useless now. I can only wait, wondering if Maggs is all right, wondering if memory deceives me and I have misunderstood the situation, the words, the nuance – that she and I had spoken in metaphor, or something... and she is not coming after all.

But then I see the light as she navigates the Beetle down the track, and confirmation I really am about to spend the weekend under the same roof as her.

Maggs!

Short for what? Maggy? Margery? Margaret? Or is it something more exotic like Imogen?

I do not know her surname, though I should. She has told it to me, once, ages ago, on our first introduction, I'm sure of it, but I was the kind of salesman who had to write names down or I would forget them, and I am long out of the habit now.

Cooper!

Margaret Cooper.

Sounds ordinary enough, doesn't it? Thank goodness she's all right. Of course she's all right, Mike. She's more capable, more confident, more certain of herself than you will ever be – though it turns out much of it is assisted by Citalopram. You should perhaps relent and go back on the stuff yourself. But forget that now, we could spend the entire weekend drinking coffee and discussing... books!

"Room for another one?" she asks – this as she walks up to the door and I step out to meet her. I'm unaccountably jittery now and fearful of the wrong

words.

Why is this important to me?

She has driven seventy miles in the dark, in falling snow, looks unperturbed, not a hair of that beehive party up-do out of place. I am so struck by this I fail to notice at first that Lesley is unfolding herself from the passenger seat, an untidy bundle of rags, and looking sheepish. When Maggs says "another one", she is not referring to herself.

Suddenly I feel like I've been ambushed.

"Long story," she says, the apology in her tone. "Tell you later, but she's really not safe in Middleton tonight. She's brought her sleeping bag. She can take the sofa. It's just for the weekend."

"Don't be ridiculous. I'll take the sofa."

She smiles. Winks. "I told her you'd say that."

All right. So... how to explain all of this...

Middleton is not famous as a football venue, but it has a railway station half way between two rival cities that are. It also has a lot of public houses with a reputation for cheap ale. On football nights then, it is customary for fans to stop off at Middleton and "tank up", as they say. The Police herd them on and off the trains at either end, but overlook the middle bit of Middleton, whose constabulary can apparently muster barely a single officer for crowd control.

Boisterousness results in broken windows, in the racist taunting of the faithful outside the mosque, and also, this afternoon, in the torching of the homeless shelter – white spirit purchased en-route from Bargain Basement and hurled in beer bottles stuffed with lit napkins. The big-tit press and their swine things provide the bogey men on their front pages. The trolls do the rest. It's as well I'm not in town myself tonight then. Anyone dossing in doorways is also game for a good kicking as the roaring scrummage comes tearing through. None of this is news, and common enough on match days, except for the torching of the homeless shelter, which I admit is something of an escalation.

Maggs tells me all of this while she cooks, and I sit at the table, watching her. I wonder at what point any of this became normal.

She has brought dinner – all manner of exotic ingredients which she throws together into a pan and makes light work of. I have already eaten, but am

grateful to accept a small portion of what she prepares – an omelette to beat all omelettes and garnished to high heaven. She wears a long corduroy skirt and a cosy mohair jumper, tries to look casual but does not succeed – is easily outwitted by her exquisite posture.

There is something lighter in her manner, though it may be nervousness she has subverted into chatter. Meanwhile, Lesley sits mute at my elbow, like a hostage, eyes sunk and dark, hands wrapped around a mug of tea. It seems we are, all three, refugees in the darkened dale tonight.

"I'm sorry for your trouble, Lesley," I tell her. "I hope you know you're welcome here. I just wish we could do more." I don't know exactly what I mean by this, but it feels right, feels proper, and anyway the least I can do is make her feel at home, though given what I know of her former home life that's perhaps not what I mean exactly.

She remains silent, seems to feel nothing of my embarrassed angst, blinks owlishly, inscrutable, wolfs her food, then slips off to her room.

"Thanks, Mike. I mean, I know you weren't expecting me to bring anyone. It must seem a bit... forward."

"Well, you know me. Submissive. Put up with anything won't I?"

"Touché."

"Don't worry, I don't see what else you could have done. How did you persuade her anyway? She always seems a bit... I don't know, surly with everyone..."

"I suppose she decided she had to trust me when I was brushing bits of broken glass out of her hair. We mustn't read too much into how she seems. Nor should we expect her to be... you know... grateful. Let's just do what we can and give her some space."

"Sure. And the bookshop? Is that okay?"

She rolls her eyes at my obsession with the sanctity of Donnegans. "Yes, the shop survived football night. At least it was okay at closing time when I locked up." She looks out at the darkness, sees only herself reflected in the glass, isn't sure she likes what she sees, checks the bruised eye for its obviousness. "Do I hear a river?"

"The Wharfe. It's close by. You can easily get down to it from here."

"So quiet, remote. Expensive, I bet."

"Not really. Not at this time of year."

She moves to the wall of books. Runs her finger along the shelf, looks at me playfully. "I'm curious," she says. "Is this how she did it? Is this how she hooked you?"

"Who?"

"Oh, come on. You know who I mean."

"Am I so transparent?"

"I watched you, remember. I watched her. No wait. It was more like this..." she pulls the clip from her hair and shakes it out. It spills half way down her back, transforms her, at least visually, into another person. Then it's the gracefully poised hand and the upright finger...

"Yes, you've got me there. That's exactly how she did it."

"Which reminds me!" she says, then takes the book from her coat pocket: Dylan Thomas. Miscellany One. She slides it over, sits opposite, looks at me expectantly. But I don't see the book. I'm still looking at her and she reads something in me that gives her pause.

"Don't you dare," she says.

"Don't dare what?"

"Don't go passing your muse on to me or it's going to be a long weekend. And I shall never speak to you again. And I shall also fire you from the shop."

I'm about to deny the very idea, but hesitate when I realise it is at least a theoretical possibility. "Em... okay. I promise."

I have never met anyone like Maggs, and something in her story resonates. But I am no longer a man interested in... well I hesitate to say the word in this context, I mean the context of Maggs, because even to think of it has me blushing. So I make a joke of it.

"You're far too old for me. No offence. I prefer fresh, impressionable young girls I have no hope of ever attaining, obviously. As for a real woman, a

woman like you, for example, I honestly wouldn't know the first thing."

She tries to read me some more, loses her page, shakes her head in bewilderment. "What does that even mean – real woman?" She taps the book, impatient now. "So come on..."

Bless me with your fierce tears I pray.

Do not go gentle...

All right. Page thirty two. The poem is heavily annotated, mostly faded pencil, lines torn limb from limb in some long forgotten lit class. But in the margin, bold as brass, written in a fresher tone of pencil, there's a web address.

www.misstikkalmuse.wordpress.com

So... is this what Grace Milner is drawing my attention to? Does she keep a blog? Does she call herself online: 'Misstikkal Muse'?

Maggs waits on my conclusion. "Well?"

"I think we need to go to the pub."

"Pub?"

"Not for a drink, for the wifi."

"Now?"

"No, it's still snowing, and the pub's miles away. Let's see what the weather's like tomorrow. Or we can try the coffee-shop in Grassington. I'll buy you lunch."

I show her the blog address. She looks doubtful. "You think that's her? But it sounds so childish. What would she mean by it?"

"I don't know."

"Maybe we're being too optimistic here. Maybe she is after all, simply dead..."

"I refuse to believe that."

"But Mike, if all she's done is run away, she must have heard by now her

disappearance has thrown everyone she knows under the spotlight."

"Maybe she needed the time and the confusion it would cause to get as far away as possible. Start a new life somewhere. What I don't understand though is why lay a trail to her hiding place? And such a cryptic one. It's like something out of a young adult mystery. It all a bit Enid Blyton."

"But is that what she's doing? All we have is a calling card that dropped out of a book, and the line of poem that may point somewhere else – we don't know where. Perhaps all she's trying to prove is that she's alive, so people will stop looking."

"Then why not post a picture of herself with a newspaper, like they do with hostages?"

"Hmm."

"What are you thinking?"

"Only that you simply can't tell with people can you? Such a pretty young thing – elegant, graceful. You'd think there was no harm in her at all, yet she's managed to ruin your life."

I have to think about that one. It's true, I suppose. But I forgive her. "My life wasn't that great, Maggs."

"Why not just forget about her now?"

"Because as far as the world's concerned I've done her in, and thanks to the swine things the whole world knows where I live, so I can't start again. I can't even go home, until I've shown them I'm not guilty of anything."

"We'd better hope she's alive then... and she means to prove it."

Chapter Sixteen

I pass the night half in and half out of sleep, but not unpleasantly so. Maggs has brought a duvet from her guest room at home, thinking Lesley might need it for the sofa, but as the arrangements have fallen, it's me who lies under it. It's unusual for me to sleep beneath the same roof as anyone else, and I discover during my waking moments I am aware of the women adding something, a unique quality to the silence, and not unpleasant.

Then there's the sound of the river which is gentle, soothing, but then a wind picks up and begins whistling around the eaves, and I am imagining swine things in the darkness again, something malevolent still out there, threatening. All that's protecting me is this duvet, Maggs' duvet, scented and soft against my skin. It brings to mind the feel of her that afternoon as we briefly embraced – like a freshly made bed, I believe I noted at the time.

Firm, crisp, cool.

All of this is absurd, and not a little awkward.

I have managed to spare them the sight of me in my pyjamas, not sure what the fashion for these things is nowadays. However, I'm certain my matching wine-coloured cotton tops and bottoms, neatly pressed, complete with cream edging and little chest pocket would be most amusing to them. Very eighties, I suppose. I would also spare them the sound of my bathroom noises, so am extra careful in my usual small-hours micturitions, making sure to keep to the edge of the porcelain.

I am also careful to be washed and dressed by nine, long before they are about. I do not shave, having decided on cultivating a beard as a disguise for my return to civilisation, and which has the added advantage of saving time. I only fear it will make me look slovenly. Then I draw back the curtains on the French windows and discover the dale under three feet of snow. This is impressive of course, but also somewhat... inconvenient.

Maggs' car is just a blob of white. Ditto Mavis. Neither will be going anywhere for days, least of all Mavis who can find little by way of traction in snowy conditions. I don't suppose Lesley has anywhere else she needs to be, but Maggs? I hate to be the bearer of bad news, so evade it by making porridge for myself, then find my hat and coat, and I dig my way out from the verandah to the meadow by the Wharfe. Here I set to work with unashamed glee on a snowman.

Yes, a snowman.

After all, save that ubiquitous Agincourt salute, what can be more defiant of the gravity of any situation than a snowman?

I have rolled a huge ball for his belly and my hands are already frozen. I need twigs and pebbles now, so wander off to the riverbank to forage for them. The snow is thigh deep in places, powdery, soft, and has me merry with the effort. The Wharfe is black and wide, and icy in its sluggish fringes, swift running midstream.

I wonder if Seacombe is looking for me, and rather resent his intrusion into my thoughts just now, so I dismiss him forcibly with my search for pebbles, but then am reminded of his eyes. He was of no help with the swine things, unconcerned, unsympathetic, so I feel no guilt at my disappearance. It's one more thing we are lacking, I suppose, apart from Grace, this sense, or hope of finding any sympathy in the world, any compassion, any concerned assistance. In our vulnerability we are only ripe for further kicking.

In pursuit of this precious bane we make ourselves entirely alone and loathsome, and we make of everyone who is not us an enemy. Precious Bane, yes... Mary Webb (1924). There's a copy on the shelves here. But worse, we make enemies even of ourselves, resent ourselves for failing to get richer quicker, to be more popular, more beautiful, more intelligent.

We are, at root, all of us insane.

As for Seacombe, it's not like I have left the country and do not think for a minute my amateur attempts at evading the national surveillance network will have made any real difference. I scan the sky for helicopters, but there is a blanket of silence and a cap of grey across the Dale. All is rendered in monochrome and very beautiful. It stills my paranoia to manageable proportions. Out here you can almost believe in life again. The Dales in winter, under snow and frozen can be cruel, but they do not pretend otherwise. There is no duplicity. The Dale does not send you anonymous messages, calling you vile names, calling down rapists upon you, and wishing you dead.

Only people do that.

When I return to my snowman, I see Lesley at her most animated yet. She is rolling a ball of snow for his head. I am nonplussed, but also moved she would willingly... what's the best word here? I suppose it can only be: *play* with me. She is a different person, formerly so weighted with languor, careful with her energy, she is expending it

now in spades, in her movements, and it's even escaping sideways in excited little squeaks and grunts. For a moment I do not know what to think, settle at last on allowing myself to delight in it. She looks up at my approach and I moderate my pace in case she thinks it too aggressive. But my angst is punctured by her smile, both it and I rendered pathetic.

She... accepts me! Trusts me... trusts me enough we read each other's minds and understand the necessity of working together to lift the ball of snow onto the snowman's shoulders. She has a keen sense of fun – as do I, or so I recall, and am merely short of opportunity these days for expressing it.

He's a fine fellow, six feet high, but lacking detail now. I take the pebbles from my pocket, give them to her and she seems overwhelmed by this unexpected responsibility as creative director. I watch while she dabs the pebbles in – buttons and eyes. I think briefly of Seacombe again when I see those eyes, but dismiss him, and quickly, before he spoils the moment entirely. She carves a mouth, a cockeyed smile with a bunny-rabbit's buck teeth. It makes me laugh. I have not laughed properly in years. Then Maggs is at my elbow with coffee.

"Reminds me of someone I know," she says.

Lesley takes her mug, wraps her hands around it, stands with us. She has a healthy colour about her now, looks pleased with the effort, eyes sparkling. She's young, can recover quickly from any hardship, but any more time on the street will ruin her, and it would be a tragedy.

Can we not do something?

Maggs slips her hand through my arm as if we are now a different story, have known each other for ever and Lesley is our gift to the world. We feel the strangeness of it, feel a shiver which we dismiss as the cold and we laugh self-consciously, rub our hands and stamp our feet back into reality.

"Looks like we're snowed in then," she says.

"Yes."

"How are we for supplies? I've brought a little with me, but..."

"We'll be fine. There's a bit of a shop up at the farm. We can walk to that."

Details, practicalities, the killers of fancy.

Lesley returns to her task, rolls more balls of snow, this time, she says, for a cat to keep the snowman company. Maggs and I retreat to the warmth of the cabin, settle in armchairs by the picture window. She's thinking of what just happened, as am I. I fear to mention it because it's awkward and inexplicable, and bound up in a maelstrom of myth and make-believe, but Maggs is not so reticent.

"Out there, just then..."

"Hmm?"

"You felt that? I know you did."

"Yes, strange, wasn't it?"

She looks pointedly at me for an explanation and I might furnish one, but I don't know if her imagination has served her the same story as mine. Oh well: "For a second there, I felt we were long married, and Lesley was our daughter."

"But... that's ridiculous."

"Not entirely ridiculous, surely? It's not true, certainly, but somewhere in the queer mix of fate and circumstance, and all those parallel universes that are supposed to be out there these days, it's at least a hypothetical possibility, don't you think?"

"I suppose... but no more likely that you're married to Marilyn Monroe."

"True. Or Tippi Hedren. Lovely as Norma Jean was, I find I'm more drawn to Tippi, though either fancy is equally appealing to a gentleman of a certain age."

"Tippi who?"

"Alfred Hitchcock – Marnie, and The Birds?" Maggs is not a film buff then. "Best not to worry about it. It was nothing, really."

"Mike..."

"Maggs, please. It was nothing."

"I'm married. Married for a long time, and I... I know I've said some things to

you, and it's hardly what I would have chosen for myself, the way things have turned out, but I'm not about to change anything on account of it. And if I did, it certainly wouldn't be to..."

To what? To tangle herself up in extra complications with another man? Or with me in particular? I should hope not. Maggs does not strike me as the needy type, but she does need to leave her man, though it's not my place to tell her that. She would be fine living alone, nurturing a circle of female friends. She has plenty of energy, still finds a touchingly genuine meaning in her work. She would be more than fine, she would likely thrive.

As to the certainty of not being with me: "Well, of course not."

"I didn't mean not with you... *specifically*... just..."

"No need to explain. As I said it was a passing fancy. Something odd about Lesley, don't you think? It was you who was drawn to her in the first place."

"Anyone would have done the same. Looking at her all day like we do through that bookshop window."

"No. I don't think everyone would. I was quite happy to turn a blind eye."

"I know you were."

"Shameful really. It was fear, I suppose. Fear of wanting to involve myself with anything or anyone who might need my time and my energy. I'm very selfish about it, I suppose. Not an attractive trait. Used to being on my own for so long I don't relate well to others at all any more."

"I've noticed. But I wouldn't worry, she doesn't look like she needs much. She has plenty energy of her own. It's just bottled up. Maybe she could lend us some of hers?"

Lesley is working the fine detail into the cat now – some pebbles for its eyes, some reeds she has plucked from the riverside for its whiskers. It's overlarge for a cat but very beautifully rendered. It is a lioness perhaps.

I wonder. "All she needs is a chance to get back on her feet."

"You think? But with the world being so topsy turvey Mike, few of us can stand on our own feet for long without getting knocked off them, and anyone who can't get back up of their own accord gets left behind in the stampede. She'll struggle. Can't even read, or write. What kind of future has she? How

can anyone leave school these days unable to read and write? It's... outrageous. How on earth does anyone these days end up unable to read and write? It's not like she's unintelligent... But she's always going to need someone to look after her."

"She'll struggle finding work you mean? Sure. Literacy rates are falling all across the western world, but where we're heading literacy's not so important any more, is it? No sense having a good grasp of English when the world is jabbering in machine-speak. Knowing how to read, we learn what the rules are, understand what's expected. Knowing how to write, we express our thoughts. But in future the machines will just tell what to do, maybe even through voices projected directly inside our heads, and then it won't matter a damn any more what we think about anything."

I've gone too far. Maggs sighs heavily. The cynic soon becomes weary company. "You're just tired and upset, Mike. Anyone in your place would feel the same. But things aren't so bad as all that, and they will get better."

"Will they? Can you honestly say we've not subverted ten thousand years of the evolution of human consciousness? Sacrificed it to this idea of a world that's dead from the neck up." I nod to the books that line the wall. "There's the sum of our last ten thousand years. It's hiding out in the Dales, going mouldy, gathering dust. We trade it for pennies in the shop day to day. And we've no one to bequeath it to, because no one reads any more." I hold up the phone. "Here's the next ten thousand, always supposing we survive into the next century, and the earth doesn't swallow us up first."

"Well, I was meaning you, personally. You'll get your life back eventually. As for the rest of us, it's always been this way. There never was a golden age. You know that. We all felt more confident, more optimistic when we were younger. Oh, come on, Mike, buck up. I'm leaving tomorrow, and I don't want to be thinking of you wallowing here up to your neck in self pity."

Self pity? I had thought I was being merely visionary, though I admit it does sound rather bleak.

I crack a smile to put her at ease, but she's unconvinced, calls me impossible, but in a tender way. Still, I see no other future, though for myself it may yet also entail a prison cell and my name added to the list of sexual deviants – I mean I presume sex is at the bottom of this. It usually is when girls go missing. But that would be a cruel and unjust end to my days, and I am resolved not to be dragged down such a path without a fight.

I think back to that moment, the three of us in the snow, think of it often,

actually. I think of the rush of emotion, and I realise of course, never mind snowmen and Agincourt salutes... love is the greatest gesture of defiance we possess. If we subvert love, if we decline it, if we cheat on it, if we betray it...

...we really are nothing.

And yes, Mike Garatt has been successful in declining love for the whole of his life.

Chapter Seventeen

No, not all of it. Just that bit from his later thirties, when his twin pseudo-loves, Laura and Sandra had moved on and away from him, or he from them – I forget exactly which now. That would be towards the end of the nineties, pre Millennium angst building like a fever among the swine things, and me wondering if the whole world was mad, or if I was mad for not joining in.

But then I've always been a bit aloof like that.

The nineties were a tough decade, the business of making things declining gradually throughout the west, and everything profitable in the world going out to be made in China. My weekdays around High Wycombe were increasingly interrupted by the desperate broadening of the foundry's horizons into Continental Europe. Thus, I came to know Paris a little, and Frankfurt, flying in and out of my Middleton nest, much to Laura's dismay, who did not see me for weeks on end. I wonder if she knew, really, that I was leading a double life?

Spies must be like this. I have read much of Le Carre's opus and recognise from him the ease with which one can accept even a fabricated reality as the absolute truth. Well, not everyone I suppose. Just people like me whose hold upon reality is habitually loose

You ask how could I have been so crass, so callous in love? And in truth I do not know. I've tried to explain it, and admit to looking back upon it now with much regret, but also at times with a fond nostalgia. Every relationship is a different story. I suppose I was merely reading two books at the same time, discovering something fresh in each at every return to the bookmark.

Of course they were not the stories Laura or Sandra were reading themselves. It was their stories that spelt the end of everything, eventually, and after that, as I've told you, I simply felt unworthy of women, and avoided them.

It's interesting to me how some men find it impossible to contemplate life without women, or at least without the ever-urgent business of pussy, but really it's not that difficult. Psychological castration, if you can manage it, or at least have it imposed upon you, can also be a very calming, liberating experience, though it helps to be an older man. For a youth it's a harder business altogether.

For me it began with the first redundancies, the castration I mean, when I witnessed men who had grown skilful in the science of metallurgy and the

pouring of metals finding themselves earning mere change from tyrants in pointless, dead-end warehouse jobs. Oh, we sought the markets where we could, held back the worst of it for a time. I even found us a contract in the shipyards, swapped Paris and Frankfurt for the Clyde. I like to think that helped keep us going through into the noughties, and for a time it looked like we might survive. But then came the crash, 2008. It opened its jaws wide and swallowed the foundry whole. It's just a ruin now.

Anyway, enough of that.

It's mid afternoon and I've made it to the little Dales village of Grassington, an adventurous but exhilarating walk up-river, several miles of snowy path, made light work of in boots and crampons. It's a pleasant place, Grassington, kept afloat and looking all nineteen-sixties-prosperous on the tourist dollar. It's rather like something of the old England we see on Christmas cards and Jigsaws. And it reeks of all that patrician grace I'm sure the right-leaning press would sooner take us back to, even though it never existed – the patrician bit certainly, and the grace of course is entirely imagined now.

The closer truth is its always been a cruel fate to be poor, so the fewer poor there are the better.

Why is the past such a liar?

I am alone, having left the women at the cabin, being the only one of us equipped for such a journey in these conditions, though I'm uncomfortable now for want of a warmer mid-layer. It's below freezing and the wind is a devil. The roads are passable to four wheel drive, but otherwise snow is drifting in places still to waist height, pathways shovelled out to front doors and salted. Mavis would struggle – fortunately I won't be needing her for weeks.

The café is open but not expecting business. The lady of the establishment looks up in pleasant surprise, offers me a cheery good morning. I kick the snow from my boots, remove them on the mat, and enter – stealing a glance at the front pages of the complimentary newspapers as I pass.

The torching of the homeless shelter in Middleton steals the headline, allowing me to raise my hopes that I have become already yesterday's news. But I note second up: chief suspect in the disappearance of Grace Milner, unemployed loner, Michael Garatt, 57, has evaded the police, and is believed to have left the country.

What?

How am I supposed to have done that with an expired passport? Is it also suspected I hired the skills of a people smuggler? Were my doodlings with a black marker pen on Mavis' number plate really as successful as all that? The organs of state are perhaps more feeble than I had given them credit for.

But wait - they have my name now!

Shit!

So... what next? Remember where you are, Mike. Smile. Shake the snow from your hat.

"Em... Good morning."

I order coffee and cake, pay cash. Everyone knows you can be tracked through the card system. Then I sit anticipating the arrival of my refreshments, reflecting in a state of subdued alarm they could be my last that are not served at Her Majesty's pleasure.

Wi Fi is slow, which makes the Onion Browser even slower. Onion Browser? Yes – you know – it's that thing that lets you connect to the Internet without giving away your location, or the identity of the device you are using. It does this by relaying your internet requests through several different countries and covering the tracks in between. It's a tool used by investigative journalists and whistle-blowers in dangerous parts of the world which these days seems to include most of it, but otherwise it's for paranoids like me and little boys in search of pornography.

Still, if I had used it in the first place, days ago, I would have spared myself my current notoriety.

Yes, I was careless but had not thought it necessary.

I use it now to create another spoof email address, use that address to send a message to Seacombe: *What's going on with the headlines? You want me to come in, I'll come in. I'm evading the press not you. And who gave the press my name?*

A little terse, I suppose, but politeness and simpering passivity has thus far got me nowhere with the authorities.

Coffee and cake arrive. It is not accompanied by police sirens. I suppose they'll struggle like everyone else in this weather – though I note the

newspapers had no trouble getting through.

"Surprise, all that snow," she says. "Wasn't forecast."

She is a matronly dame with a kindly, sing-song voice – name badge tells me she is called Pamela. She carries the high colour of a hill farmer, doesn't recognise me from my grainy mugshot, a repeat of yesterdays, I note. Surely they can do better? At least there is nothing unnatural in her demeanour that would betray her suspicions, but then Maggs was right, even my own mother, God rest her, would not have recognised me from that picture.

"Yes, pity those having to commute in it."

"On holiday, then?" she asks. She is politely nosey, and no doubt a terrible gossip. I shall have to be careful.

"Doing a little walking."

I hope she does not settle in to chat, or I may give myself away by being cagey – most people have an instinct for these things that is not generally acknowledged. But then the doorbell tinkles and I'm saved from further inadvertent self-disclosure by an elderly couple, come for soup of the day. They are local, and strike up a conversation with Pamela, drawing her away.

So... what am I doing here anyway? Ah...

The Misstikkal Muse blog!

What is a blog, you ask? And it's a good question. It's a website anyone can create and view, a place to express yourself however you wish. Use it as a diary, use it to show off. It is, I suppose, one of the more literary forms of social media, but more usually only a vehicle for the selling of services one neither wants nor needs. Truly informative blogs are the exception, most are rubbish. Blogs used by old windbags like me to showcase their idiosyncratic writings on the state of the world are rarely read at all, except by other paranoid types.

The Misstikkal Muse loads sluggishly through the Onion. Then, of a sudden, one is presented with the curious picture of Pythea, Oracle of Delphi, at least as depicted by the Victorian Neo Classicist, John William Godward – to wit: a naked young woman in plaits, cooling her bum on a ceremonial throne from beneath which a wisp of psychoactive vapour rises.

I'm reminded the Neo Classical school had a penchant for the Roman and

Greek period, yet to our eyes now appears stylistically and quite uniquely Victorian – Victorians in togas, so to speak. This young lady isn't wearing one of course, yet still appears the obvious representative of one period aping another.

Godward! Something tragic in his story, I recall. I Google him quickly in another tab, locate an informative blog on the topic, save it for later, then flick back to the Muse.

I have a few options from the header page – a simple menu points me to the blog entries, but there is only one, and no words at that, just another picture, this time a photograph of a pair of books: Seamus Heaney's "Opened Ground", and Arundhati Roy's "The God of Small Things". These, remember, are the books I chose for Grace.

The entry is dated this morning.

"Everything all right my love?" Pamela makes her polite enquiry just as the revelation is hitting me that Grace is definitely alive.

"Oh... everything's fine... thank you. Lovely piece of cake, that."

Thank God!

But this is a strange proof of life – proof enough to me, yes, and fairly conclusive at that, but meaningless to anyone else. After all I could have lied about the books I chose for her, and I could have created the blog myself. I could be that sneakiest of scribes: the unreliable narrator. But don't worry, I wouldn't do that to you. I'm in enough trouble as it is. More conclusive would have been a picture of herself posted with today's newspaper. Too crass? Or does she not want anyone else to know?

Under the "about me" heading, where the blog author has the opportunity to introduce themselves, she has written only, and somewhat enigmatically:

My name is Grace, and I am a lie.

Comments are blocked so I cannot leave a message. It seems I am, however, permitted to request to follow. I create a new identity for the purpose, call myself Mike.O.Donnegan in the hope she'll work that one out. Then I tick the box and await my muse's pleasure.

What does she mean by all of this?

Email returned from Seacombe now: "Headlines nothing to do with me Mr Garatt. Shouldn't believe everything you read in the papers. Where are you, anyway? Call me."

Call him? Nice try.

"If you want me to come in, say so, and I'll go to the nearest police station right away. Otherwise I'm keeping my head down. So, do you want me to come in or not?"

I give him a further ten minutes, take his lack of response to indicate I am not, after all, a fugitive from the law, rather that the swine things are so void of fresh news they are now making up stories, or rather repeating stories from the past, cutting and pasting me in as the malevolent party. As for my name, they had only to ask around.

It does not help my situation.

I am of course, completely ruined now, smeared with the brush of criminality and worse – sexual deviance. No matter these things are untrue and Grace is alive – they trigger shadow responses in others, touch upon the traits we all secretly fear we ourselves harbour, and therefore attack in others.

I am forever now "that guy". And mud sticks.

Do I copy a link from the Misstikkal Muse to Seacombe? Sensible, you might think, but if she's as smart as I believe her to be, she will have used a proxy, like the Onion, to create the blog, thus rendering its authorship untraceable. Then Seacombe will think only what some of you are thinking – those who subscribe to the unreliable narrator theory – that I created it to cover myself, that I may even be adding to it as we go along in order to lend authenticity to the story of myself.

No, the less contact I have with him the better.

I wave my "nice, harmless chap" goodbyes to Pamela, then I'm on my way. It seems reckless showing my face about the village now, but thus far I have solicited only passing glances, and the occasional Ow'do. I am more obviously a tourist here than a misreported fugitive, so I brazenly poke my way about the square, which is rather attractive under snow. I am of course unable to resist the bookshop. Among other things, they have an interesting second hand spiritual section. I have wondered about suggesting one to Maggs, though it seems unlikely I shall ever be able to show my face in Donnegans again without causing a riot.

I find copies of Tolle's "Power of Now" and "A New Earth" for fifty pence each, always popular. I purchase them, cash of course, as a gift for Maggs, for the shop. We'll make a couple of quid profit on them. Not much, but small things are important these days. I also pick up a drawing pad and a set of pencils from the newsagent for Lesley, then consider myself a fool for doing so. It's just that, unable to read, I fear she will go mad in the cabin. She can perhaps doodle... or something.

Except she's not a child is she?

Well, I don't know... what would you have done?

Next I try the thrift shop in search of more books, but here they are not so much of a bargain. Instead I discover a fine Harris Tweed Jacket going for a tenner. It will serve nicely as a mid-layer for the trek home, and certainly a lot cheaper than a new fleece from the walking shop.

I don't mind dead-men's jackets, if they are of a worthy label, draw the line at their trousers, and am of course superstitious as anyone else about their shoes. Yes, I know these are not dead men's clothes – more likely cast offs from people with over-full wardrobes. It seems I am not so proud as I once was, but then, like all the other high-street household names, true gentlemen's outfitters are very much a scarcity in the provinces these days.

You're perhaps wondering at this detachment, given my circumstances? I have no home, at least none I can safely return to, and the swine things have cast doubt into the minds of everyone who knows me, and anyone who might hereafter encounter me, colouring all my relations with the world. And to all intents and purposes, like Grace, I have vanished myself from the face of the earth. It's a truly extraordinary experience. Yet I find it's quite normal, still, to seek comfort in the familiar.

And while seeking it, I am quietly thinking that Grace is alive somewhere, hiding, yet also revealing her presence only to me. I have already asked the obvious question and cannot answer: Why?

But in the same breath this question begs another, also obvious, at least to me: could it be she wants me to find her?

Chapter Eighteen

"But why on earth would she do that?"

Maggs' objection is logical, appeals to what is rational and is hard to argue against. You don't exactly disappear yourself on a whim. There has to be a compelling reason, something desperate about it. And after going to such lengths you don't deliberately leave the door open a crack for a stranger to follow through and expose you.

Do you?

"I really don't know, Maggs. I'm at a loss."

"If I'd run away, it would be so no one could find me."

"Well, me too. But she clearly means something by it, and I need to find her if only to prove she's not dead and to clear my name."

"Send the cops that web address, and leave it to them."

"But it's not enough. It's not proof in itself. I could have made it up."

"No. I'm your witness, remember? I was there when you gave her those books."

"But still... it's too complicated for a headline. A picture of Grace alive and well is the only thing that will satisfy the swine things and get me off the hook."

"But she could be anywhere in the world."

"No, I'm assuming they'd know if she'd used a passport. And I'm assuming she's not a criminal with a false one, which means she's still in the country."

The light is fading now, a mist rising from the river, and from the snowy meadow. The burner is pumping out a soporific heat, the shadows flickering, lending something of the dream-world to our retreat.

Lesley has received the pencils and paper with more enthusiasm than I was expecting. She now doodles in her pad at the dining table like an infant, head bent studiously close to the paper, tongue slightly protruding. I am beginning to suspect among her other challenges she is also myopic. It would explain her

often-times vacant stare. Maggs is right, she needs someone to look after her for a bit, take her in hand, and she could be all right.

Maggs has another query now, exploratory, tentative, deep: "Why that poem, do you think? Why 'Do not go gently'?"

Again, I've no idea. I hadn't really thought about it, but feel obliged to attempt an answer. "It's popular. I suppose there's a good chance I would have heard of it. I can't think of any meaning in the words of the poem itself – the onset of death and refusing to go quietly. That makes no sense at all in this context, so perhaps it was just a marker, somewhere for her to write the address of her blog, and draw attention to it."

"But to assume you or anyone else would know to find it in Miscellanies One, it's all a bit thin, isn't it? Those two books could easily have become separated – the one with the poem, the one with the calling card, pointing to the poem. The chances of anyone making that connection are so remote..."

Maggs pulls the clip from her hair, shakes it out in frustration. "Is there some other way you might know her? Could you have met her, dealt with her in the past, without knowing?"

It seems impossible. "She's a complete stranger to me."

"And are you still in love with her?"

Ooh! That was a little barbed. Lesley pauses in her drawing. I know she's listening – we're not exactly whispering – and I don't mind, don't mind either of these women bearing witness to my confessions of stupidity. It's as if they cast their spell on me last night, something as we slept, as we dreamed together.

Am I in love with Grace? No. I have tried to explain. "Usually a man projects the myth of his muse out onto a real woman. But the opposite has happened here. Grace was real, but suddenly it's like she's become a myth. Instead of coming from inside of me and moving out into the world, she gone from the world to a place inside my head."

It's an interesting point, I think, but one to which Maggs has no response. It's not my fault, she was the one who wanted to go deep.

We're getting nowhere.

I brew three mugs of coffee, set one down at Lesley's elbow. She has become taciturn again, absorbed in her drawings, a brief nod being the only acknowledgement of my presence, but I read it now as kindly meant. She is understated in her gestures and in her self. She is drawing the snowman and the cat, but not as they are – fading from view now through the window – more as she imagines them to be, still, and as she imagines the valley under snow. The drawings are bursting with energy and detail, and exquisitely executed, like the work of a savant, except there is nothing wrong with Lesley. She has merely been overlooked all her life.

The drawings amaze me.

I make no comment, can't think of anything I might say that would not sound condescending. I only wonder if she might be persuaded to gift me one before she leaves.

Try another tack perhaps, back into the shallows where we can all more safely wade in case of shipwreck: "Where did you teach, Maggs?"

"Middleton High for a bit. Then I was at the sixth form. Why?"

I don't know why. I was just making conversation except: "That's where Grace teaches, the sixth form, teaches English. I mean, *taught*."

"Well, if it's anything like when I was there, no wonder she ran away."

"You didn't recognise her then? I mean from the staff?"

"No, I would have remembered her – especially since we'd've been in the same department. And it's been five years since I resigned, Mike. She would still have been at school herself. What are you driving at?"

"She could have recognised you though – old staff photos, that sort of thing, then seen you in the bookshop?"

"Possible..."

"So maybe it was you she meant to find that poem, make the links – a fellow academic, and student of literature?"

"No. Remember it was you she asked to choose those books for her. It was you she wanted to find that poem. You she made her big eyes at. You she wanted as her witness, her proof of life."

It seems there is no escaping my responsibility here, my guilt, my comeuppance. "Okay..."

"What do you think of it, anyway?" she asks. "That poem, I mean? What does it mean to you?"

"As a poem? Not much – seems all wrong to me. It seems to be saying that if you've lived a big life you shouldn't be so accepting of the end, that you should shake your fist at death. Maybe I'll feel differently when my own end is near, but right now I just think when you know your time is up it's better to be more calmly accepting, better to go quietly into that good night."

"Why?"

"To pick a fight with death... it's to assume there's nothing after it, that we're giving way to oblivion, as if we have any choice in the matter. But maybe it's not like that. Maybe there is something. I mean, afterwards. No sense then turning up on the doorstep of an afterlife ranting and raving is there? What would people think? It's hardly the behaviour of even the most modestly enlightened being."

"You honestly believe that? I mean... you're *religious*?"

"What? No. But in death, same as in life, it's just generally better to be... calm and dignified. To go about things quietly. To be at least... optimistic."

"Why?"

"It's just my style, Maggs."

"Why?"

I don't know what she's pursuing here, tossing the 'why' stone repeatedly – trying to shake me from my tree perhaps. I'm beginning to feel like a monkey leaping from one flimsy branch to the next.

"Because other than being the centre of our own universe, none of us are anybody, really, are we? No sense then in puffing ourselves up."

"Hmm, try telling that to the boyfriend, Melvyn." She smiles, something wistful in it. "Or Martin for that matter."

"Martin?"

"Husband."

"Ah... "

So we come to the thorny issue of the husband. The husband puffs himself up does he? All right, come on Mike, be polite. Be conversational. Enquire: "Em... what does Martin... do?"

She's not expecting my interest, though she clearly invited it. Looks momentarily flummoxed. "Repairs photocopiers. Covers the whole of Northern Europe, actually. Spends most of the week away. There used to be three of them, now there's just him – and never enough time to do a proper job, he says. I'd hate that. Never knowing where you're going next. Last week it was Edinburgh, Helsinki, Riga, then Rochdale. He should get out, do something else, something where the demands aren't as... absurd. But like you said, there's not even warehouse jobs now."

Thus a different story for her husband emerges. He is Martin Cooper, a technician, a repairer of intricate machinery. But all the interest and Meccano-set enthusiasm of his boyhood has been squeezed out of him as his life is now hitched to an Outlook Scheduler, and the machine dictates his waking days, and even where he lays his head at night. Come Friday he fetches up back on his own doorstep, drained and angry, and then he drinks, puffs himself up and roars out his despair at his own castration.

He rages.

"Sorry, Maggs. Sounds awful for him."

"It's not your fault, Mike. Not really his, either."

"Won't he... be concerned? Your,... being away?"

"You mean angry? Let's just say it's not the first time I've disappeared for the weekend. I... used to have another place. Still do in a way. In Clitheroe. It was my mums. She died a couple of years ago. Only a little place. I didn't know what to do with it. Didn't like the idea of just selling it. I sometimes used to go there, but it's rented out now – Martin's idea. A bit of extra money coming in."

She's quiet for a while, allowing this further news of her domestic arrangements to sink in. The silence though is strangely comfortable, accompanied only by the crackle of the burner and the swish of Lesley's

pencil. And then: "You know, we needn't take that poem literally," she says. "Thomas wrote it while he watched his father dying, like I watched my mum, and yes, I can understand your feelings about death and going quietly. She was so dignified, right up to the end and I felt that if only she'd resisted a bit more she might have lived. But it was selfish of me. She was eighty five. It was her time. I was trying to avoid the grief of losing her, that's all.

"You're a dignified man, Mike. I've always admired that about you. But there are also times when death isn't inevitable, times when we're standing by watching something precious fall apart, and maybe then it's right to do something, to shake our fist, tear out our hair, beat our chest and scream at it, times when we shouldn't go quietly. Times when we shouldn't be so accepting, and... dignified."

It takes me a moment to catch up with her gist, hung up as I am on the idea she admires something in me, even if it is only the mask of my dignity.

We have sunk again into slightly morbid depths. I could tell her I felt the same at witnessing my aunt's decline in the nursing home, and my uncle's before that, or that I was too young to remember the deaths of my parents who went early. But I let it lie. She's right though; sometimes things die in the world when it's not right for them to do so, but we let them go anyway.

She brightens. "So... tell me about you. Never married, you said? Mixed up with two women, once upon a time."

"Yes... but not exactly proud of it."

"How long?"

"Oh, ages. Six years? Then Laura got fed up and moved on. I was with Sandra a little longer."

"Six years? That's quite a deception."

"I know. I was living two completely different lives, you see? At opposite ends of the country. Two quite separate stories. And I believed in each one entirely."

"Still..."

"I'm not excusing it. But I didn't set out to deceive. At first I was just flirting, you know? I wasn't sure either of them were interested in me, or could be persuaded. Laura worked in the bar of the hotel where I used to stay down

south, a place near High Wycombe – out in the Chilterns. Lovely part of the country. Sandra worked in the supermarket at Middleton up north where I did my shop on Saturdays. And I thought, whichever of them shows most promise will be the one I settle with, and I'll stop flirting with the other. It was Sandra who warmed to me at first, eventually. We went out for a meal, I remember, a lovely summer's evening. There was an immediate connection. We agreed to meet again, and I was looking forward to it."

"And Laura?"

"Next day I was travelling south with the job, as usual. Put up in the same hotel, but avoided Laura in the bar that night out of respect for Sandra. But, in the end it turned out Laura was more forward... all that flirting, I'd thought... well it was a bit like flogging a dead horse, actually... but she took it to heart when I stopped. Her reaction... well, it took me completely by surprise. But by the very nature of things with Laura, I didn't think it would last, and I'd settle with Sandra. Couldn't last... except it did. So I settled with both. Greedy for both, and cowardly."

"That's exactly the sort of dilemma I can see you struggling with. Polite to a fault. Never wanting to cause offence. Heavens, what a tangle. How did it end?"

"Well, six years is a long time. I suppose they simply grew tired of waiting for me to commit, to grow up, to put a ring on their finger. And my job was all over the place by then. I was seeing less of them, working in Europe, then Glasgow. They moved on."

"You've not seen them since?"

"Sandra sometimes, around Middleton – you know? We still say hello. I've not seen or heard from Laura, but it's such a long time ago. Sandra has children, a girl and a boy, both grown up now."

"But this must have been in the nineties. It's half a lifetime ago, Mike. And there's really been no one since?"

"Not really. I'd not the heart for it any more. I mean, I'd made such a mess of things before, it didn't seem proper. And any woman finding out about that in my past would have a hard time forgiving it, a hard time trusting me, wouldn't they?"

"Well... regardless of whether a woman could ever forgive you, to say nothing of Laura and Sandra if they ever found out, I think it's time you forgave

yourself for it."

Forgave myself?

All right, yes, she's worked that one out – the guilt I mean. As for forgiving myself, I doubt I'll ever be able to do that – and it's much safer the Muse lives in my head nowadays. Still, I think she means it, and I'm touched by the sentiment.

Then she asks: "Have you never thought of making a clean breast of it?"

"Clean breast?"

"Talking to them, owning up?"

"Yes, I've thought about it. But I'd only be seeking my own redemption at the cost of hurting both of them, wouldn't I?"

"That's one way of looking at it. But Mike, you're not... seeing all of this... I mean Grace's disappearance and your falling under suspicion as in any way some sort of karmic retribution for past sins, are you?"

"I... I suppose I am, Maggs."

"But that would be rather... silly, wouldn't it?"

"Yes it would, rather. But there we are."

Chapter Nineteen

It's nineteen ninety two, a memorable night. After studiously ignoring Laura in the bar all evening, she has let herself into my hotel room, having purloined the spare key, and is working upon me with the benefit of considerably more carnal knowledge than I shall ever possess, and certainly more than I had credited her with. It seems there is nothing like ignoring some people for making them finally notice you.

After pursuing her fruitlessly for months, I am suddenly and unexpectedly birthed into the Erotic, a place that is by turns smooth and silky, then hot and sticky. And more... in its desperate moments, it is animal madness itself, compulsive as an alcoholic binge, and in its breathless, post-coital stillnesses it is utterly profound.

I had not expected such a thing to last for more than a night, that a lover as skilled as Laura would move on in the endless pursuit of variety her art must demand. She was inventive, and spirited, tender and generous, and I don't know what she saw in me, or why she hung on to me.

But she did.

Maggs says I am compliant. Perhaps Laura thought so too, that I could be moulded into the shape of the lover that most suited her, and for a time at least, in that one small regard, I managed not to disappoint. As for the rest, I failed appallingly of course. I should not have allowed it. It was disgraceful of me, and the only lame excuse I can come up with is that she was just so damned exciting!

She would have been the same age then as Grace is now. And for all the years, I feel no different in myself, at least in the memory of those times. Yet I know I *am* different, and certainly no longer a slave to the urgency of sex as we knew it then. I can well do without it now, and fail entirely to understand men of my own age who cannot. But this is not to say I do not miss the Erotic, at least in principle. Being entirely subjective, unlike sex, it is not something that can be faked. I look back upon it as a gift of those times, one never to be repeated.

As for Sandra, she was always willing, enjoyed our couplings immensely, but there was nothing of the erotic about her, more of an earthy urgency.

Why am I thinking of this now? It's four in the morning and I'm wishing I had not drunk that last coffee. I throw back the duvet in frustration and tiptoe to

the bathroom.

I would stroke Laura.

She would stand upon the fake fur rug in her bedroom, her pretty little toes dug into it and she would shiver to the passage of my fingertips across her skin. She would be wearing something of lace and satin. And beads. She had a fetish about beads, I recall.

I would stroke her as if I were a blind man committing her curves to memory. And speaking of blindness, at times she enjoyed being blindfolded – a scarf, something soft and silky and tied loosely. For my part she insisted I wore a clean white shirt and pressed trousers, polished shoes, like a businessman, but no tie. And somehow such a simple compliance enabled the Erotic in her, which in turn enabled it in me.

I bought Sandra a similar line in under-things, but she never wore them. Saving them for a special occasion, she would say, an occasion that never came, and she did not like to be stroked, or blindfolded. It tickled, she said, the stroking, and caused only an uncontrollable giggling. As for the blindfold, she said it frightened her and did not like sex to be frightening. It was thus I discovered the other side of the coin, so to speak, that the Erotic is there to be explored if we can find it, but we should never take sex too seriously either.

I don't know what use this knowledge is to me any more.

Grace, Grace!

What the Hell happened to you?

No longer sleepy I pick out a book from the shelf, sit at the table, click on a lamp. Lesley has left her drawings and pencils, neatly stacked. Besides the snowman and his cat, she has drawn Maggs in profile. She must have done it while Maggs was sitting with me that afternoon. The likeness is striking. The elegance, the upright manner, the eyes focused, enquiring, the curve of the lips. I am also subject, and flatteringly done, but this must have been drawn from memory, as is the front of Donnegans book shop.

Her skill with line and light and shade is impressive, her memory, her eye tremendously accomplished, yet apparently untrained. And useless, of course.

I know what you're thinking.

You're thinking she could make a living as an artist, perhaps, pull herself up

and away from the street? Rags to riches. But representational art, even as accomplished as this, has long sunk to being the preserve of the unknown amateur. She would need a fine-arts degree and a fifty grand debt behind her before she could even have the temerity to ask to be taken seriously by the world of the arts. Now the only thing that sells is stuff akin to an explosion in a paint factory, provided the artist is already a name of course – a name gained by whatever means they see fit.

And to be a name these days is not what it used to be.

I remember then that picture of Pythea on Grace's blog. Odd choice. I mean Pythea was an oracle, wasn't she? Not a Muse, though I admit the definition is somewhat loose. But Godward, the guy who painted her? Yes, I recall now I've stored his story from online, take out the phone and flick through the details, looking for clues to other puzzles, because at this time of the morning, everything is related isn't it?

His family wanted him to be a stockbroker. He couldn't bear the thought of that, wanted to be an artist instead, and had to make it pretty much on his own, only to be completely disowned by everyone he loved, even though he beat the odds and became successful. How must that have made him feel?

He moved to Italy with his muse, one of his models he was deeply in love with. But she didn't love him. And then his art went out of fashion, and the critics suddenly hated what they'd once loved in him. To top it all, his family thought he was a disgrace, to the extent of having all photographs of him destroyed.

He died by his own hand, with his head in a gas oven.

He said the world was not big enough for him and Picasso, meaning Picasso's vision of the new would displace all favour of his own presence, and he wasn't wrong. His loneliness must have been absolute by then. Grace has for ever been deserting us that way.

He lost her. Lost Grace. As I have lost her too. Am I similarly in danger of losing my reason to be? Other than cowardice, what prevents me from adopting his solution? If only he had raged a little more at the dying of his own light, he might have turned a corner, found a new way to live, a new love. But it's as if depressives seek their own end, and close with it meekly, long before we are due.

We weather the world as long as we can, but are never really a part of it, and would sooner quit it for former glories. Is that what Grace has done? Has she

refused to close with fate?

And what fate was that?

Maggs is right. I need to start shaking my fist a bit, or I'll be going to the same way.

So... breakfast now, and daylight reveals patches of green in the snowy meadow. The mist is heavy with the thaw, and it drifts, allowing shafts of mellow sunlight to stroke the dale. Maggs' yellow car is revealed like a giant daffodil sprouting from late winter earth. She stands at the picture-window, observing quietly the movement of light while sipping tea from a china cup. She is barefoot, ankles and calves finely rendered, pale as alabaster. Her hips, her thighs, the dip of her waist, all shapely as any caressed by Godward's brush. Again... apologies for the objectification.

When I say in my more fanciful moments I imagine her as my wife, I do not mean it literally of course, or sexually, heaven forbid, but more as I imagine marrieds after long decades, serene in companionship, uncomplaining and entirely chaste. As for the Erotic in Maggs, I cannot at times help wondering if she is more Sandra than Laura? But really, it's best we do not consider it at all.

I'm sure we're both safely past all of that.

"Sleep all right, Maggs?"

"Hmm? Oh... rather poorly I'm afraid, Mike."

"Me too."

"Was it the couch? I'm sorry... foisting myself on you like this."

"No, the couch was fine. It's my thoughts that kept me awake."

She nods, does not enquire, though I was hoping she might. Instead: "Mike?" She's still looking out on the dale as she speaks, her tone has a hook in it, something awkward, something I might not like. "I'll probably head back this afternoon," she says.

"Okay."

"Can Lesley stay on with you for a bit?"

"What?"

"I've asked her, and she'd really like to."

"But... how much does she know about me? I mean... my situation?"

She turns at this, serene, already anticipating my reservations, and how to smooth them over. "She knows what I know. And she trusts you. She's afraid, Mike. If she goes back now all I can see for her is that doorway again. But the streets feel dangerous now. I can't describe what it was like in town the other night. This is the safest place she's ever known."

"But are you sure she's okay... I mean with me?"

"Why wouldn't she be?"

"It's just,... I imagine every man she's ever met has only had one intention."

"Are you saying that's your intention also?"

"Of course not. Absolutely not!"

"Well then... I told you, she trusts you."

It's the craziest thing I've ever heard, but then these are not normal times. "Okay then. Of course. It's fine."

She returns her gaze to the dale, to the changing light. "Thanks." And then again: "Mike?..."

"Hmm?"

"What we talked about last night..."

"Yes?"

"I mean your… former romantic dilemma..."

"My being a two timing bastard, you mean?"

"I've been thinking about it and... for what it's worth, and as silly as it might sound, I forgive you. As a woman, I mean, and having come to know you as I do, and imagining you in that situation. Yes... I forgive you."

"Em… well... thank you. But please don't say you've been awake all night thinking about that."

"Not entirely. There were other things... speaking of which... I wish you could forget this business with Grace Milner. Find someone, Mike, someone real, preferably nearer your own age. Don't be alone. It's no good, you know? Being alone."

Is that why she won't leave her husband? Memories of past happiness, and hopes for a better future? Comfort? Security into old age? Company, and its antithesis: the fear of loneliness? Is that really all there is and no great secret, no mystery to Maggs' back-story.

Like any of us, all she wants is an ordinary life, and has merely fallen victim to those who would deny it her.

Chapter Twenty

The swine things have found Sandra. She has been on social media, made the mistake of defending me, saying how she did not believe any of what she's heard about me could possibly be true. That was sweet of her and I am deeply touched by it, but wonder if she would feel the same if she knew the truth. However, her sentiment is shortened by the swine things to read: Sex Pest's Ex Stunned, and salacious variations thereof.

Since I am now a nationwide pariah (and sex pest, suddenly), I wonder if Laura too has made this connection. I wonder if she will be hitting social media, hooking up with Sandra. You know the rest of the plot – one of them does the maths, and tomorrow's headlines begin: Two timing Sex Pest. Or perhaps, for the sake of brevity they will simply cut it to: Bigamous Fiend. Or do I flatter myself such a thing is even considered newsworthy these days?

Nothing really shocks us any more, does it?

Still, I can't be worrying about any of this, though things do seem to be gathering a somewhat perverse momentum in my absence, and I wonder if this hiding out is the right thing to do. I wonder if it's merely cowardly.

"So, Mike... are you in love with Maggs?"

I am in the coffee shop in Grassington, again, this time having walked up from the river with Lesley. Her feet are sore on account of her toes hanging out of her boots. I will buy her new boots and warm socks from the walking shop when we're done. She'll no doubt protest, but I can't have her limping behind me all the time, and she seems to want to come with me on my outings from the cabin – followed me a couple of miles down river yesterday, after Maggs' departure, and then all the way into Grassington this morning. She mostly keeps her own counsel and, so far, I don't mind her shadowy and somewhat enigmatic presence.

I was sad to see Maggs go yesterday, helped her brush the last of the snow from her car, waved her off as she drove the bumpy track back to her version of reality. I felt a lump in my throat, actually, not knowing when or if I would see her again, not knowing how she would deal with Martin on her return. So, in a way I'm perversely grateful for Lesley's presence today, because it forces me to stiffen my upper lip.

Actually, she's not bad company, not as strange and threatening up close, as she once appeared to me from a distance. I am beginning to recognise the

person beneath the rags of her disaster. Indeed, she is what we would have called in the olden days, rather a 'nice' girl.

But to the question: Am I in love with Maggs?

I slept in her bed last night. Well, not *her* bed exactly, but one she had slept in the night before and left charged with something that has kept me awake and wondering... wondering about sex... about, well... pussy, actually. Not Maggs'. Just in general, I mean. Wondering if in keeping myself so chaste all these years I am simply proving to myself I'm damaged beyond repair, incapable even of forgiving myself for past sins.

Is Maggs correct? Do I need to simply put myself out there again? It seems so unlikely now, I mean considering how I shall be forever tainted with this thing.

The pillows were scented with Le Jardin.

Scent of Laura. Scent of Maggs. Scent of my erotic past.

Why am I only making this connection now?

Do not think of Maggs in the same sentence as the word 'erotic', Mike.

Why not?

"Maggs is my boss, Lesley."

"Bossy, for sure."

"And she's married."

"Fancy her though?"

"I really don't think of her that way. Do you fancy Alan?"

Ah! A blush and a sideways slide of the eyes in order to temporarily exclude my presence. She does not like to be found out. And I'm not sure I like to be challenged – perhaps she is feeling more relaxed with me this morning. But she must be prepared for challenges coming the other way or we can have no relationship.

"He's nice," she says. "Sorry – you and Maggs. None of my business is it?

You can say so."

All right, it's a start, and I'm about to say so, but discover I can't. It simply wouldn't be polite, would it? And I fear that by protesting too much I prove to her the opposite of what I'm saying. Though I forget now what I am saying, exactly.

"She's been a good friend throughout my recent... em... difficulties, Lesley. And I'm grateful... but she certainly doesn't want any more complication in her life right now."

"Complications?"

"Yes, for example by late middle aged gentlemen harbouring unrealistic fantasies about her."

"Eh?"

"I mean, I can't..."

"Can't what?"

"Allow myself to *fancy* her, that's all."

"You either do or you don't," she says.

Which is true.

"Then I don't. Absolutely not. End of story." Which I realise is not actually true. Maggs is a very fine woman, but to admire is one thing, to 'fancy' is quite another. Intermediate and slightly troubling conclusion therefore: it's possible I do then, in a sense, to some degree, however slight,... 'fancy' Maggs.

Of course I bloody do.

Lesley looks thoughtful for a moment. "It's just that... I've seen the way she is with you. The way she moves, the way she looks at you... the way she talks to you."

"Really, Lesley..."

"Just sayin', that's all."

"Well don't. How's your coffee?"

"It's really good, thanks."

"Need to do something about your feet next."

"They'll be all right, soon as they warm up a bit."

"Frostbite's not just something you get from exploring the North Pole, you know? We'll get you some better boots and some nice snug socks, and that's that. No arguments."

She manages a smirk.

"What's so funny?"

"You."

"Me?"

"Talk like you got a stick up your bum, and I can't tell half of what you say, but sometimes it comes out plain, and then you're like... a different person."

"What do you mean, different?"

"Like you were, maybe... before."

"Before what?"

"Before you got broken. What else? Look, I couldn't help over hearin' all that talk last night and it's not like either of you were quiet about it, neither, but this dodgy love life of yours – get over it, will you? There's plenty would have done that and meant it, and not cared if anyone found out or not. You didn't do it to be bad, Mike. You did it to be kind... and okay you were a bit of a chicken, and a two timing dickhead, but I forgive you for it too, like Maggs does, if it helps, but really, it's history. And it's no big deal, so get over it. Okay?"

She has a point. I certainly didn't act this way, or dress this way when I was younger. And I'm sure I didn't always speak like someone out of a nineteenth century novel, if that's what she means. If not a symptom of the damage it can be read I suppose as a metaphor of the dressing I pull over it. And yes, I suppose men have done much worse things to women, done it in spades and

spitefully. But still...

She forgives me too? Bless her. I doubt Laura or Sandra would feel the same way.

"Thank you."

"Think it doesn't mean anythin'? Coming from me."

"No... I wasn't thinking that." I was thinking actually, it meant more, being recognised by her as somehow broken. It confers a definite kinship upon us, like the one she has already established with Alan. Still: "If Maggs heard us talking like this, you know, she'd be telling us to buck up."

"Telling us to what?"

"Stiffen up. Chin up."

"Would she? Sounds like she's got problems of her own."

"Oh?"

"Come on, you seen that black eye? Husband did that, din't he?"

"Yes. She denies it, but… yes, I think so."

She bites back the expletive, glances out of the window, conscious we are observed and possibly overheard by Pamela, and a clutch of locals at distant tables. Then out it comes, muted, mouthed almost: "Bastard."

And with that one utterance, Lesley and I are utterly united, our fledgling kinship sealed. We are family. Martin is indeed a bastard. *A fucking bastard.*

"Quite."

"And she won't leave him?"

"She says it's... complicated."

"No it's not. Someone hurts you, you got no excuse for stayin' with 'em."

"Well, I'd agree. But what if they don't mean it? Perhaps they're

hurting too, for different reasons... maybe they're ill... maybe if you stick with them you can get them through it, make them better. For better or worse, that's what they say when you get married, isn't it? Otherwise what's the point?"

"Ill? Drunk more like, or high on somethin'" Lesley shakes her head in wonder. "Woman like that, too!"

"Bossy you mean?"

"No… well, yes… but classy too. She's got real class, Mike. Way she dresses, way she moves. Like a... a..."

"Movie star? Very true."

"Love to be like that, move like that. Carry myself like that. But yea, she's bossy too. And I think you like it."

"Now, now..."

"Just teasin'."

There's a mischievous twinkle in her eyes and I realise I'm smiling. She has also had me defending Maggs' husband in the same breath as labelling him something profane. Such is the duality of man, and Lesley is rather a provocative little urchin, but quite lovable. I feel a peculiar tug of affection as I'm thinking this, then embarrassment for feeling it. No sense forming any attachments here, Mike. There is still a good chance this girl will be drawn back to the street, possibly to die there.

"There's only one reason she won't leave him, Mike."

"Oh? You sound very sure."

"Nowhere else to go."

She drops another few cubes of sugar into her already overly sweetened coffee, takes a sip, smiles, shy. "Think about it."

Her meaning eludes me. I wonder instead when the last time was she visited a dentist, realise she probably parted company with her national insurance number years ago, that all such doors are now closed to her. I wonder if she can even prove her identity. Identities are important now. Indeed it may soon be a criminal offence not to have one, even if it is only a fake one – I mean not

really who you are at all.

The 'phone bleeps. Incoming. Mike.O.Donnegan is accepted as a follower of the Misstikkal Muse blog.

Comments are still disabled.

I look up as if expecting to see Grace at the next table, smiling, but it's just me and Lesley, alone in a world of strangers.

"Everythin' all right?"

"Eh?" Oh... there's plenty I could think of right now that isn't all right.

But what is wrong with the present moment, Michael?

What?

It's a line from Tolle's Power of Now, to which I resorted after giving up on my other reading material last night.

It comes at me of a sudden, unbidden, instils a peculiar mindful awareness. The present moment? Scent of coffee. The innocent charm of Lesley's smile. Warmth. Burble of distant conversation. The high ring of a teaspoon against the rim of a china cup. The otherwise quiet pace of this old stone town, still snow dusted. Do I oversell it to you? I manage a breath.

"Everything's fine. You ready to move on?"

Chapter Twenty-One

Her feet are small and white and bruised, and her toes are swollen and the over-long ragged nails have been bleeding. She does not mind me touching her as I steady the ankle, settle her foot in my lap and roll on a thick, warm walking sock. It's as if she accepts I possess an expertise in this akin to a medic, a thing that cancels automatically the need for body space and the taboo of contact.

"You know," I tell her, by way of distracting anecdote, "in the British Army they insist a soldier always has a pair of clean, dry socks every morning, even in the midst of battle."

"You were in the Army, Mike?"

"No. They'd have made mincemeat out of me I'm afraid. Like most things, it's just something I read. Don't know if it's true, but I found it moving, you know? Young lads out among the muck and bullets in some foreign war-zone, and pulling on a dry pair of socks every morning. There's a sort of grace to it, don't you think? Holding on to something comforting, something fine, no matter how grim things otherwise are..."

I'm blathering. The walking shop is not busy and we are observed by the assistant. Are they father and daughter? Uncle and niece? Are they lovers?

Always the lowest denominator of sex.

She's puzzled. "Grace?"

At first I think she's asking about Grace Milner, and this in turn puzzles me. But of course she's simply asking for a definition of the word 'grace' in this admittedly rather convoluted context.

"Oh... you know? Like a dancer's grace. When you see it, it makes you feel something... something uplifting! But you can find a kind of grace in other things too. Even if it's not obvious what it is, you can still feel something. And then you know. It's just a question of looking hard enough."

I'm not sure she understands this. She might, if only I could explain it better.

"These boots are too expensive, Mike."

"Don't worry about that."

"I'll take the cheaper ones, and thanks."

"But, are they comfortable?"

"I've been wearing boots a size too small for years. Trust me, anything else will feel great."

"Okay."

"Mike?"

"Hmm?"

"Is there something you want from me? Cos I got nothin'. Right?"

"Want? Nothing. I just want... for you to be safe. And warm. That's all. Maggs too. We want you to be safe."

Note how I take cover in the collective. Again. But I should want that for everyone, shouldn't I? All the time. I know I can't help *everyone*, but I can help Lesley, so it's right I should. But why now of a sudden, when I was content to let her sit out in the rain and the cold the whole winter?

Is it only because Maggs has told me to? Or is it more that I have allowed myself to see Lesley now as human, to feel her presence as a warm, living person with hopes and dreams, and the fact she's ever so good at drawing? And how can we hope to preserve the humanity in our selves if we are taught to deny its existence in those not like us, and in so many subliminal ways?

She doesn't believe me, and who can blame her? No one offers anything without expecting something in return, do they? And I suppose it's in our nature that all such transactions between the sexes are ultimately... well... sexual. But surely that's only in a world void of grace, of decency, a world corrupted, a world blind to the fact that to give selflessly is its own reward. All of this... yet she leaves her foot resting in my lap with a potent stillness, granting me the queer subliminal impression that she would, if necessary acquiesce to any of my wishes.

Even *that.*

Carefully I lower her foot to the floor, sit away from her, remembering too late how a woman's foot was once something of a fetish of mine, remember of

a sudden making love... to Laura's feet. Heavens! Don't think too hard about that, lest you find the idea ridiculous, or perverted... but she had the most exquisitely attractive feet. Shapely, soft... and she could grip things with her toes. Oh… lord.

I see her reclining now, nude, resplendent in only her beads. And I blush.

"Cheaper ones it is then?"

Walking back to the cabin, Lesley trails a long way behind and I do my best to pretend I'm ignoring her. My feelings are hurt, I mean that she would think I expected anything, and more especially that I might even have been negotiating... *that*... and from one so young and slight as her. And I am mortified too she would consider it as reasonable exchange even for a pair of,... f,... fucking boots.

Whatever have we sunk to?

But most of all it's a novelty my feelings are hurt at all. It's a long time since anyone managed that, and it intrigues me.

I know... she's embarrassed she would think it, embarrassed she would voice it. And now she's sulking in that strange way she has because she doesn't know what to say to get us back to where we were, and I'm sulking too because neither do I.

It's not her fault. It's been expected of her before, and I'm sure she has played it to her advantage whenever she had to, played this frightening one-day-at-a-time survival game she plays. Why should it be any different with me? But how long can she last this way before the predations of life at the bottom of the food-chain catch up with her?

I'm waiting on the step of the cabin when she trails up, reluctant, her gaze sliding sideways as if still to deny my existence.

I try to lighten the atmosphere. "So... boots okay?"

"Yep. Good, thanks."

"Lesley, look..."

"Oh?"

"I'll say this just the once, okay? Then hopefully we can move on and forget I ever said it, unless I'm reading things all wrong, in which case I'm about to make a total prat of myself."

"Ohhh,..kaaay. I think."

"Maybe guys have expected things from you in the past, even guys my age. Personally, I find that disgusting, but it happens, I know, and I know you've suffered abuses. But I don't want anything from you... or anyone. Nothing at all. Okay? You're welcome to be around me. But I quit ages ago, right?"

She smiles, flops onto the steps beside me. We can still see the trails of Maggs' tyres in the track where she drove away. Was that only yesterday? We follow them into the distance, feeling the empty space of her going, both of us I think wishing she was still here to put us back on course.

Maggs has a way of doing that.

"Quit? Quit what? What do you mean, quit?"

"Just... life you know? I mean the way it's played these days."

"For a guy who reads a lot you don't half talk a load of bollocks."

"Eh?"

"You can't just quit on life. It won't let you. You wake up and you have to deal with it. Every day. No other choice."

"Well... all right, not life then. My life is fine... or it was until recently. I was perhaps meaning other people. I quit on other people. I find them simply... too difficult."

"Then why you being so nice to me?

"Because Maggs told me. And I don't know how to do it any other way. And because I... want to."

"You 'int quit on Maggs neither."

"Hard to quit on Maggs. She keeps ringing me up."

"Yea, well. Reason for that's..."

"Will you let that drop?"

"No. Why should I? And if you don't mind my sayin', Mike, I think you're bein' a bit slow there. And you should think about it, because she is for sure. Thinkin' about it, right?"

"She's a married woman, Lesley. Old fashioned in that way. And she's thinking no such thing."

"Pah!" She's quiet for a bit, then tells me: "You think it's our fault, don't you? How things are like they are? I mean, you older people. You blame us for drugs and knives and the sleepin' around and the piles of shit everywhere, and all that disrespectin'. And maybe you're right. But there's other stuff, just as bad, and you're to blame for all of that."

"Oh? Such as?"

"Hangin' on to things you know are no good just cos you're afraid of change."

And letting go of what should be treasured? I know. She's right. I can't argue there – no safe ground, so I need to distract her from this: "Actually, come to think of it, there is something I want from you."

She stiffens, wonders if I'm joking, and if I'm not what might it be that I want? It seems pussy is easy for her, but we've already ruled that out. It's other forms of intimacy she has difficulty with. "Oh?"

"One of your drawings."

She laughs. "What? Really?"

"Yes. Any of them, it doesn't matter – oh... except the one you're probably thinking."

I mean the drawing of Maggs, and she knows it.

"How do you know which one I'm thinkin' of?"

"I read minds."

She looks coy. "Has to be that one or nothin' then, dunnit?"

I snatch a breath, at least we are back in a place of mutual trust. No, dammit,

Mike, we are back as friends. Speak more plainly will you? Take that stick out of your arse!

"Hungry yet?"

"Starvin'."

"Okay, let's see what there is."

Chapter Twenty-Two

The day comes on misty with a drizzling rain sweeping over the tops to wash away the last of the snow. We've had the best of the weather now, so settle indoors, make lunch together. Then I stoke the burner and Lesley retires to her room while I attempt to sink into a book.

I take up Precious Bane again, Mary Webb. It's a Sarn Edition, 1939, coarse wartime paper, a little pungent and mould mottled.

In my opinion it is the finest of her works, not that she has many followers these days to argue the toss. There was also Gone to Earth, of course, which I found intriguing and, between the lines at least, sexually strange. I recall a Powell and Pressburger movie of that one with Jennifer Jones. 1950, I think. Can't remember any of the male leads. Sorry, none of this is relevant except as an illustration of my lack of focus and how the mind flitters.

Actually I'm hiding from the fact I really need to know more of what's going on out there, beyond the dale. I need to be back in the world, learn how it's treating my name. And I need to know if Grace has posted anything else. This lack of Internet at the cabin is, for once, infuriating, the dale in danger of becoming my prison for want of wireless connection.

Precious Bane.

Does the phrase go back to Milton? I'd Google it if I could, but I'm sure it does.

Money, power... the treasures most sought. Bane as in 'the bane of our lives', the arch-ruiner of souls.

Is any of this relevant?

It's always relevant, Mike.

Plotline: Money makes you mean.

Early evening, and there comes the sound of a car on the track. This panics me, has me leaping to my feet. I am thinking immediately of the swine things. Have they found us out? Would they be so bold as this? I part the curtains a crack and peer out. The dusk has deepened quickly to a thick velvet night. All I can see are headlights approaching.

Not here, please God! Give us some space!

I step out to meet them. Had there been a pick-axe handle convenient I think I would have taken it with me, for such is my mood of a sudden. Not for myself, but in order to protect Lesley. Perhaps there is something in us that needs to protect others. No, wait... there's no need for me to go exploring another existential tangent here. Everything's all right:

It's Maggs.

I recognise the Yellow of her bug now as it draws near. But then I think things through a little deeper, and I wonder if she's hurt. I wonder if her husband has taken revenge for her absence, and she has nowhere else to turn. Stepping out, she cannot meet my eyes. Looks tired. It's bad news, something she's struggling to articulate.

"Oh, Mike."

"Maggs?"

"They burned your place down."

"What?"

"Last night... there was some vile chatter online... they came from all over. I'm so sorry."

We're definitely outdoors as she begins to tell me this. I remember the silvery drizzle settling like dew upon her hair. But as I come round from thinking on it, I'm sitting at the table in the cabin, either shivering with cold or trembling with a kind of shock, or nervous excitement – I don't know which. It just feels exquisitely weird. Lesley has put a blanket over my shoulders, a mug of sweet tea at my elbow. Maggs is opposite, silent now, reading me while I calculate my losses.

It's mostly clothes and trinkets, and books of course. But nothing irreplaceable. Everything of value I have carried with me which, given the size of Mavis boot, is either a sad indictment on the sum total of my life's esteem, or it qualifies me for entry into a Zen monastery.

After some hesitation, during which she is perhaps judging my readiness, she brings out her phone and flicks through pictures she has taken of the smouldering aftermath – windows cracked and burst out, soot stains rising,

the pretty leaf-green paint peeled away to the harsh tin underneath, except for those bits on which I can make out the trollish graffiti: Killer. Shit. Nonce. Peedo. [sic]

"I took them this morning as I was passing. I went to see if everything was all right. And this is what I found."

None of it was reported, at least not this morning when I checked the nasties for their usual poison.

"That's quite a list," I tell her. "Looks like every ne'er-do-well in Middleton's had a go at that."

"I'm really sorry, Mike."

"And the garage?"

"What? Oh... that looked okay. Your little shed too. They're both sort of tucked away aren't they. All that bamboo stuff."

"Yes. I've been meaning to get that under control..."

"Just as well you didn't then."

"The police were there?"

"No, just the fire brigade, damping down."

There is a floor-safe let into an old inspection pit in the garage. It's where I keep certain papers, old fashioned deeds of ownership, a little cash. It's well camouflaged, plus Mavis normally sits on top of it for extra security. At least that was spared.

"Well, if the garage is standing it means I still have a roof over my head."

"Mike, no. You're not sleeping in that garage. I mean, you are insured, aren't you?"

"Yes."

"Then they'll find you somewhere else to live while they replace the van. You're not sleeping in that garage. Okay?"

But I'm not sure I want to live in a van any more, not after seeing how easily

they can be destroyed, how utterly vulnerable they are to society's mindless abuses. Neither am I sure I want to sit my dream house on the land now either, given the reputation it has been painted with. The past is gone, ruined, shat upon by all and sundry with their hurtful nouns. Where am I to find the grace in any of that?

What's wrong with the present moment? Well quite a bit, Eckhart, actually... except wait...

I find it in the blanket around my shoulders, I suppose, and the fact Lesley put it there. Indeed it's in the sympathetic company of these women and all in spite of their own profound difficulties. And as ever it's in Maggs' confident poise, which, fake or not, makes me want to live up to that old ideal she so embodies.

It's all so extraordinary in its ordinariness.

Because nothing is ordinary any more.

"I suppose I'd better go back. See what I can salvage, if anything. It's just... those swine things."

"It's all right. They've gone."

"Gone?"

"That's the other thing I came to tell you. They arrested Melvyn this afternoon. It's him they're writing about now. Him they should have gone after in the first place if you ask me."

"But... this is ridiculous. Grace is alive."

"And hiding. And if anyone knows why, or is the reason for that, it's going to be him, isn't it? And more to the point, Mike, it's nothing to do with you. So forget it now. Just... rebuild your life."

Rebuild my life? Yes, I suppose that's possible. It depends how far I intend going back.

Chapter Twenty-Three

I have read only a little of what's been written about me – the inaccurate and highly emotive cut-and paste journalism, and then of course the appended and uncensored comments made by sundry self-appointed spokespersons, champions of folk-justice and 'common sense'.

Thus Jennywren97 says I am to be castrated and fed my own penis. Blowhard567 says I am to be strung up and left dangling for pigs to feed upon my entrails. There is a veritable feast of the foulest verbiage, all of which concludes with my death, after prolonged and excruciating torture. The imagery is medieval, terrifying, apocalyptic.

I wonder where people get this stuff from. Is it from vile movies? Or does it dwell permanently in the subliminal realms of all us humanoids?

Ludicrous spelling and disappointing grammar subtract nothing – indeed seem only to add to its disturbing nature. I also wonder what has broken in the machine to allow such threats to go un-moderated, and to what extent Jennywren and Blowhard are truly anonymous, since the cops had little trouble beating a path to my door for merely looking at someone else's social media account at an ill timed moment.

All of this seems overblown to me, and not quite real, but it's clear there is something cruel at the root of human nature, something that would destroy the anomalous in man, no matter what its description, in order that the social cohesion and racial purity of the tribe be maintained. And that's fine if you're of the tribe, but the term is broad in its compass and it's sights can be brought to bear on anyone, and for any reason. It's at such times we discover who our natural enemies are... but also, I note, our friends.

On my return from the Dales that day, I was braced for first sight of the expletive laden carnage that had befallen the van, only to roll up late morning to find Alan at work with a paintbrush. He had already covered the offensive words and was proceeding to tidy the rest of it as best he could, solely for the sake of appearances, he said. The van itself was gutted stem to stern, a hole burned clean through the roof and of course quite uninhabitable.

There was nothing to be salvaged.

"Didn't want children seeing those words from the road," Alan explained.

"Quite right, Alan. Very kind of you."

He was thinking of innocence, of preserving a thing I'm not sure exists anymore, not as we experienced it ourselves as children. He was thinking also of friendship – that and the fact, as I later found out, Maggs had asked him to do it. He was curious Lesley had travelled with me, but too reticent to enquire further. And of course any answer I might have given would have sounded bizarre.

I remember sitting on the step then to await the arrival of the insurance man. It was looking like rain, and the wind was cold. I fancied a brew and putting my feet up, because that's usually what one does on returning home, and it was disorientating to be denied this simple thing, with nowhere to go except a long drive back to the cabin for the remainder of the lease.

Only Lesley's quiet presence rescued me from despair.

I felt my relationship with the old place very much in doubt then, indeed it was blown sky high by the flames that had burst the roof. Lesley sat beside me, Alan set down his brush for a moment, sensed something in the air, something of the lament in my gaze, and he said: "Lovely garden, Mike. What do you use on your lawns? My mums are all moss this time of year."

That he is not a man of many words added weight to the moment.

"Oh... just bit of normal weed and feed. Rake the worst of it out in spring, then mow every week. I use an old cylinder job that belonged to my uncle – not too close a cut mind."

And with that, Alan brought me back to earth. It was still home then, this place, memories returning, pegging down the flapping tent of my trepidation, thoughts of the lawns greening, becoming velvety, shunning the fell creatures who had trespassed here and literally shat in the borders by looks of it – and the smell. My home was only temporarily confused then. I would put the picket fence back up at some point, if only as a statement. But what I was thinking more than anything what this garden needed was a proper house in order to fully restore its dignity.

And mine.

So...

In the meantime, I am found another caravan by the insurance man, and it's here I lay my head, from here I write now. It's on a holiday park, and is rather

a fine abode, six berths, three bedrooms, space-age kitchen and panoramic windows overlooking a salt marsh by Morecambe bay. It is of course entirely devoid of books which also lends it rather a sterile air, but other than that I am glad I paid over the odds for insurance now as it seems to have provided premium benefits when I least expected to be needing them.

It's late and Lesley is slumped, fast asleep across the table, a handful of sketches at her elbow. Twenty four hours ago, we were in the Dales. The contrast is striking. We have a fine westward view, a low orange sun slipping through chocolate and vanilla-coloured clouds into a sea of molten silver. Is that too much for you? A little overblown perhaps? A stiff sea breeze trembles the van. I don't like the thought of Mavis stuck outside in the corrosive salt air, but needs must.

I didn't know what else to do with Lesley. She just tagged along, and I have grown used to her company now, so did not question it. I did not want her melting back to the streets and am glad now, shall we say, to have retained her company.

She stirs, looks anxious for a moment, remembers where she is, sniffs her armpit.

"I stink," she says.

"Oh? I'd rather thought it was me, actually."

"I'll have a shower. That okay?"

"Of course. My home is your home." It seems for a time at least, this much is true.

"You don't mean that," she says. "But thanks... for letting me stay."

"I do mean it, actually. I really don't mind you being around, Lesley."

"It's just... you're quiet. You like being on your own, you said."

"So do you."

"True. Mostly."

"Okay, at the moment I don't know what's happening from one day to the next. But really, you're welcome. Perhaps we could just each of us enjoy being alone, but in the same place for a bit."

"Okay, I get that. Will Maggs come, do you think?"

"She's no reason to. I've texted her. Told her we're okay. You want her to come?"

"I miss her. Things feel better when she's around. They feel... safer."

"I know what you mean, but I rather thought she frightened you. I know she frightens me."

"Well, she does a bit, but not in a bad way. She wants to take care of me, wants to make everyone and everything as smart and tidy as she is."

"And you're afraid to let her?"

"Afraid of what she'll want in return. What she'll expect."

"As for what she wants, same as me, Lesley. Just to see you safe. As for what she expects, same as me again. Nothing."

"You've never asked me what I want though, neither of you."

"True. But is that any of our business?"

"Suppose not."

"Well... do you know what you want? If you do, maybe we can help you get it."

"That's easy: job; little house of my own; nice man to share it with; baby; holiday once a year at the seaside in a caravan, like this one."

Ah. Such a thing would have been possible once. Easy enough for anyone. A natural kind of living, and quite ordinary you might say. But what Lesley has just described is now impossible for most, even those working sixty hour weeks, also the reason for so much resentment and despair – not in Lesley, she seems quite sanguine about it – but in others, like her. What chance does she have? What chance would any child of hers have now, of happiness, of making sense of their lives?

"I'll go get a shower then." She slides me a drawing across the table. It's that picture of Maggs.

I have been expecting it.

"Thanks."

I must not let Maggs see it, or know that I have it. She'll only get the wrong idea. Which is what, exactly? That in the tragedy of Lesley's life, I can turn away and look a moment at Maggs and feel a little better in myself, a little more hopeful that we are none of us entirely lost.

I know that doesn't make sense.

"Night then, Mike."

"Goodnight, Lesley."

I want to squeeze her hand, give her a hug. In the absence of concrete solutions I recall a hug could at least enable one to transcend the moment, for a time. But I do nothing, turn instead to the laptop for answers to my own, at this point, more superficial quandary.

The van comes with free wifi which is always a bonus. I click the shortcut to the Misstikkal Muse blog for probably the tenth time since arriving, but Grace, it seems, has nothing further to say and I click away, disappointed.

Lesley could so easily identify what it is she wants from life. If only I could do the same. The danger, I suppose is in thinking Grace, now ever so mysterious and mythical, is possessed of the answer. I know she is not, but sometimes the answers come from studying people, analysing their motivations, rather than listening to their words.

Chapter Twenty-Four

I am also granted by the insurance man an advance in order to replace clothing, so I putter over to Lancaster in the morning to investigate the offerings of its high-street. It's a much bigger town than Middleton, so better served but also struggling against the apparently unaffiliated white van slavedom serving the online emporia. To wit: I find the traffic and the one-way system around the town quite bewildering, to say nothing of unnerving.

I visit Clarke's for a decent pair of Oxfords, and for the rest Marks and Spencer has always served me well: fresh shirts and underwear, socks for a week, trousers, a decent jacket of generous tailoring and plenty of pockets. Plain cufflinks. Tie.

The essentials.

I have given Lesley my old phone, changed the sim-card to a fresh PAYG number, put ten pounds on it, and I call her around midday to make sure she's okay. She is walking, she says, watching birds. I hear them, piping shrill. They are Oystercatchers, I tell her. She has been to look at a ruin on a green sward by the sea, she tells me. And she can see a lighthouse, not far off-shore. The tide has withdrawn to reveal its foundations on a gash of rock. She is by the remains of Cockerham abbey then, and the Plover Scar light.

A telephone is not an unfamiliar concept to her of course. She has no letters, but is familiar enough with numbers, also the adding and subtracting of them up to twenty – I presume this being the highest denomination cash note she is familiar with. We practised last night with the app icons which she grasped readily enough and was competent in working through the sequence of digits in order to call me, but I'm not sure she will have the patience for it, and even less feel the need. My worry with Lesley is that having hauled her safe from the street, she might blink out of existence at any second and I would not want that.

At least I can call her, and she knows how to answer. Naturally her illiteracy rules out our texting one another, though we may devise something later on with a system of Emojis. How much of this is really necessary I don't know. I have lived most of my life without a so-called smart-phone and can usually find my way home without one. I'm sure Lesley can do the same.

She is tragically bright.

I repair to the village of Scorton, a little place just off the A6, and to a coffee

shop I once frequented with Sandra at the weekends. I'm still wondering if I should pass on details of the Misstikkal Muse blog to the police, to Seacombe. Certainly if they have arrested Melvyn now, it seems I no longer need do it in order to prove my own innocence. But what about his?

But something holds me back, the feeling Grace meant it as a trust between us, given the elaborate means she went to in order to draw my attention to it. Though again, why she would do any of that remains a mystery. Also I would prefer to keep the police at arm's length. My recent experience of them has shaken my faith. I would certainly no longer ask the time of a policeman for fear of catching him on a bad day, and getting myself tazed – a side effect of which, I am told, is letting go of one's bladder.

The cafe is an old one, wood panelled both inside and out, in the Elizabethan fashion, though I suspect rather more mock than traditional these days. I discover it has also been adopted by senior cyclists, find myself surrounded by skeletal forms clad in colourful, yet distinctly odorous Lycra, emblazoned with the marketing logos of a myriad overseas manufactories. My thrift-shop Harris Tweed, that would render me invisible anywhere else, renders me painfully conspicuous here.

Clearly the past isn't what it was.

When does the ordinary become awkward in the face of the unusual? What mysterious force would cause us to abandon it, have us crave instead the dubious "other", to the extent of having it emblazoned across our chests and, I hesitate to note, across our arse as well.

And now a word from our sponsors...

Never mind that, Mike. Think simpler thoughts, such as... I don't know... will it be Americano or something a little less bitter this time?

It was here I first became aware Sandra intended breaking us up. I had been reading her thoughts for many weeks on the matter, but here was the first time the decision had crept into the firming tone of her voice. She had delayed for a long time, for fear of hurting my feelings, and sensing this in her had magnified my guilt ten fold. I therefore did little to dissuade her. Felt only the cowardly relief I would never have to tell her the truth: that for most of our time together she had been deceived, that I had been having the sex of my life with someone else. I might have held onto her if I'd tried harder, been a real father by now instead of this weird surrogate for Lesley.

She might even have forgiven me.

Or not.

Why did you come here, Mike? What are you doing, chasing down your memories this way? Is it nostalgia that afflicts you? Do you imagine the past was a more certain place? Perhaps it was, but only on account of your own pathetic ignorance of the world.

You should go...

Wait! Phone: Maggs.

"Mike... how are things?"

"Oh... Hi, Maggs. Everything's fine. And you?"

"Em... settling in, are we?"

Evasion duly noted. "Well, not much to settle in with, but such as it is... yes."

"It's a long way out where you are now. Was there nowhere nearer they could find for you?"

"Not at short notice. But it's quite pretty, out by the marsh. And it should only be a week or so before the new van's plumbed in and ready."

"And Lesley? She's still with you?"

"So far."

"Managing okay then, the two of you? Sorry I seem to have lumbered you with her."

Yes, you do rather, but curiously I don't mind. It seems my muse is changing tack of late. "No bother. I'm pretending she's my daughter. It seems to be working. Anyway, what about you? How are you?"

"I'm all right."

She doesn't sound all right. There's something fragile in her voice that gives her away. I don't know how Martin took to her absence over the weekend, what he said... what he did. I can't believe he wouldn't want to know where she'd been, and who she'd been with.

"You've talked to the police then?" she asks.

"About the van? Yes. I have a crime number – insurance man wanted that. I'm worried they think I burned it down myself, that I'm an arsonist and a fraudster as well as a potential murderer of young women and a sex pest to boot."

"I'm sure they don't think any of that. It was plainly a deranged mob, whipped up by the tabloids and social media. But I meant about Grace. Have you told them about Grace posting on that blog, and it proving she's alive?"

"Oh... that. Not yet. I was wondering about emailing the address to Seacombe but..."

"It's just that Twitter says they let Melvyn go this morning."

"Really? Twitter said that?"

In which case I hope he fares better than I did in the aftermath. I imagine he will not go entirely unmolested. Lose his job, his suit, his car... *no longer the right stuff, mate*. It also rather sounds as if the police are shooting in the dark on this, while the big tit tabloids continue roaming the streets with blunderbusses primed with all manner of effluent.

"I was just thinking..." she says.

"Oh?"

"If she's alive, and I agree with you it sounds like she is. She really doesn't want anyone to know where she is. So..."

"So?"

"Well, it's up to you what you do."

She sounds different... lost. It was she who urged me to tell the police about the blog, then get on with my life. Now she doesn't sound so sure, as if some instinct has her finding common cause with Grace. Both of them women oppressed.

"Where are you, Maggs? You're at the shop?"

"No, I'm in the car actually, on the M6. Just pulled into Forton services.

Heading north. Needed a break."

"Forton? But... that's just up the road from me. Look, are you sure you're all right? Only you get this little warble in your tone when you're hiding something, or you're upset."

"I do? Well... actually, I'm not feeling that great today. A bit... flat, to be honest."

"Oh?"

"I... I couldn't go into the shop this morning. Called in sick. Never done that before. It means the Middleton shop and the Clitheroe one are both closed, and I feel terribly guilty about that, actually. But then... I'm thinking of quitting Donnegans. Moving on. Doing something else. What do you think?"

"Maggs, no... that's a terrible idea! You live and breathe those bookshops."

"I was thinking maybe it's been getting on top of me."

"Okay... so now tell me the real reason."

It's rather bold of me, I know, to drive at the truth this way, but we've grown closer of late, and I trust she will consider me at least well-meaning. But one should be careful in seeking the truth from someone, in case they are willing to tell it to you more easily and more directly than you expect:

"Martin thinks I'm having an affair."

"Em... he does?"

"Someone at the shop. He says if I'm not I'd have no objection to handing my notice in, that I only work for pin money anyway, which is true, and it's not worth the stress of it... even though the shops aren't stressful, that it's being at home that's the problem, and the shops get me away from home..."

"An affair?"

"Don't worry. Not with you. He suspects it's Chris. Has done for ages... brings it up whenever he's feeling vulnerable. Like when I'm winning an argument."

"Chris?" I don't know any Chris, yet her tone implies I should.

Chris? Chris?

"Chris Donnegan? You know: *Mr. Donnegan*. We all work for him, Mike."

"We do?"

"Of course. You've not met him yet. I should introduce you. I think you'd get on."

"Okay... so... why are you on the motorway?"

"Getting as far away from Middleton as I can. Because if I go home, the mood I'm in right now, I'll kill him."

"Martin thinks you were with Chris at the weekend?"

"I don't know... presumably. Chris is the usual scape-goat, even though he must be nearly seventy now and quite openly gay. Martin can't imagine that all I'm doing when I'm away from home is seeking space... and escape... from him."

So, there we are. Maggs confesses all, and like Lesley's problems, I can do not a damned thing about any of them, except offer shelter and company and a listening ear.

"So... how far up the M6 do you intend driving?"

"Hadn't thought. Until I feel better, I suppose. All the way to Scotland if needs be."

"Then, if you'll forgive me a little role reversal just for today, Boss, don't be silly. Come off at the next junction. Meet me at the van. I'll give you the address."

"All right. Thanks."

I'd expected more of a struggle than that. I'd expected to be waving away weak objections like: I'm not sure, or I don't want to inconvenience you or anything. I can read her mind – she's close, pulled off at Forton because she wanted to be...

With me.

"So, anyway, Mike, you've not asked the obvious question."

"Which is?"

"Am I really having an affair with Chris Donnegan. I mean for all of his advancing years, and to say nothing of his sexual orientation pointing firmly in the other direction, he's still very attractive to a woman of a certain age – that is in a twinkly, silvery fox sort of way."

"Well, of course you're not. I know that. Look, this is all a terrible mess, Maggs, and I'm sorry. If I can help I will, but the very least I can do is listen, and I think it's high time you shared all of this with someone."

"Want me to bring dinner? They have an M&S here."

"That would be perfect, thank you."

"I'll see you soon then."

Soon, yes, and for a time, I am no longer thinking of Grace, but of Maggs. Of course. Again. But then I'm sinking into Mavis, tapping with futile distraction at the ABS light, which is taken metaphorically now as a sign always of trouble ahead. And I note the light is on more often than not these days.

What is Mavis trying to tell me then? What else could it stand for, other than the obvious? ABS? (Anti-lock Braking System) Abandon Bull Shit, perhaps? Yes, that's promising. Nothing worse than bullshit, is there? All Begins Somewhere? Hmm... obviously true, or how about: Avoid Bad Sex? Chance would be a fine thing, but actually best avoided completely, the bad, the good, and the mediocre.

Or not.

What?

No, what I'm thinking is that even when Maggs has recovered herself over a cup of tea and a chat, or whatever, how the hell can she contemplate going back to Martin, now? This sounds very much like a crisis to me, and me in the middle of it, though not yet a target for the obvious accusation. I realise however, it's an accusation I would gladly plead guilty to if she asked me, if it would help, that yes, Maggs and I are having an affair.

When I say 'asked', I mean would I *pretend* we were having an affair to aid in precipitating her separation... or something of the sort, that's all. It sounds dangerous of course. Worse, it sounds stupid, and I take

it back at once, except there remains the feeling that I would be proud to say it:

Yes, I am having an affair with Maggs, you bastard, now fuck off and leave her alone.

And then, on a more selfish note I feel the ruination of the known world is all but complete, for both of us, because if Maggs quits the bookshop, then my own place in it is far from certain. I can't say why, other than something fundamental collapses without her presence, you see? She's like the keystone to a fragile bridge that spans a bottomless pit between the impossible and the absurd – impossible being my life's aspirations, and absurd being the way things have actually turned out. She must leave her husband, yes, this for her own salvation. As for mine, she must be persuaded to hang on at the bookshop, because right now, it's all either of us have got.

Chapter Twenty-Five

Who misses Grace? And how was she missed? These are questions only now I am pondering. She must have a family. A mother, a father. Who, exactly, lives at Hammerton House, on Clover Lane? I struggle to recall anything on Clover Lane now, other than some old farm-houses set back on the one side, and then the abandoned quarries amid rampant alder and birch on the other. It's all quite rural and rolling, that part of town, running up to the gritstone moors of the Western Pennines. I was a kid when I last went exploring there, climbing the quarry faces, swimming in the deep, cold delphs. It was probably in the Summer of '77, the summer before I began working at the foundry.

Hell, such a long time ago.

Who even remembers the 70's now?

Is it significant, do you think?

I don't mean rationally. I don't mean is there a *rational,* logical clue there. It's more existential, that myths sometimes have a way of drawing together things that are related, but not necessarily in the same time and place.

I know that doesn't make any sense.

Hammerton House is not shown on even the newest Ordnance Surveys, and Google searches, including Google Maps turns up nothing. Yes, I've already looked. Is it a recent build, then? It sounds posh. A des res for a one-percenter. Or did she make the address up? Is the calling card a fake? Is it an anagram of something else. I have tried various permutations on paper, but nothing drops out of it.

No wait... is Grace herself the descendent of a one-percenter? But if so, what's she doing slumming it, teaching the doomed youth of the ninety nine at an examination factory? I remember seeing her in the bookshop – how out of place she'd seemed, as if she'd taken a wrong turn on her way to somewhere finer, either that or she was desperately looking for a thing she could find nowhere else.

Like inside herself, perhaps?

Pity's sake, Mike. What are you talking about?

Where am I now?

Oh... okay. It's early evening, the sun setting over the Plover Scar light. The tide is in, the sea a sluggish, oily amber, wave-crests are a burnished bronze, all falling against shingle. There are cormorants perched upon the rim of the light, and oyster catchers piping for their supper. Too much, again? I know – you might be thinking that, but really it's only in such places as this we find stillness, and then the details overwhelm us, the whole of life buzzing with a joyful intricacy rather than, as usual, the same old constipated mess that defines the world.

There was an abbey here, a towering vastness in red sandstone, now gone but for the weirdly preserved chapter house. The rest of it can be seen in the time-softened, sea-rounded stones re-purposed as flood defences. There is an ethereal quiet, something holy still in the hush of the land about these parts, and a sense of it all being on loan, low lying, precarious to inundation.

Maggs is at the van, cooking, Lesley at the table, drawing. It had a very homely look about it when I set out to come here, but I arrive now with the sense that none of it feels right: Maggs, the housewife, conforming to that stereotypical gender role, as defined, I suppose, by old fashioned men like me. Lesley too, already conforms to the teen child narrative. She has even discovered the Tetris app on my old phone, spends time focused on that little window, like we all do, hung up, busy in imagined complexity, achieving nothing.

Me? I'm the man ranging abroad while they wait on my return. I did it in the Dales too, remember? Strange archetype, this. Strange narrative: the fool's journey? Or is it the Hero's quest? Is it the conundrum that must be cracked by intellect? This too makes me feel uncomfortable, because none of it is true; the truth if such a thing exists at all, is far more confused, yet we want to believe in the existence of something simpler for fear of the opposite: that nothing means anything – never has and never will.

"He's in Helsinki tomorrow."

Thus it was Maggs dismissed Martin to a place where she might safely ignore any consequences, at least for now, push them out into a future time. Deal with them later. The later the better.

She'd arrived at the van at the same time as me. I'd thought at first to hug her some welcome, as I remember she'd once hugged me, that it was a permitted intimacy between us now, but she'd looked awkward, embarrassed. Instead, I invited her in for tea.

"How long is he away for?"

"A few days."

"Back for the weekend, then?"

"I expect so, yes."

We were sitting in the window of the van by then, hands wrapped around mugs of tea as we would often do at the bookshop. *How I miss that bookshop!* She wore the blue trouser suit, hair perfect, scent of Le Jardin, looked prim, smiling, confident, though possibly also a little stoned on citalopram, or something of the sort.

It was a mask then. She was incongruous, displaced now, wasted. I remember thinking that without her job, without her place in the world, she'd be heading for jeans, and a tee shirt and the sags and bags and all the sorry wrinkles of a permanently premature retirement.

Yes, I know that sounds crass... I mean of me to say it, but I cannot hide from the fact the thought disturbs me now, as I look out to sea, into the west, into the place of death and dying. She was meant for better things than that, better than dependence upon a man who hits her, a controlling man. And in another twenty years we'll all be old.

Hell, I'll be nearly eighty!

I had thought it a time of retreat, of rest, of the contemplation of sunsets like this, for without the vigour of youth, what else are we fit for? Or am I just old before my time? I need to do something, *dammit.* I'm too old and too screwed up for the modern way of working, but too young still to be going down without a fight.

Do not go gentle...

"Maggs, if you'll forgive me..."

"What... forgive you what?"

"I know it's not my place to tell you what to do, or what you need."

"No, it isn't. But you can tell me anyway. It's up to me whether I take offence or not. So?..."

"So you need your own front door. And a key to keep others out when you don't want them. And you need the same bed to lay down in every night, secure in the knowledge you can rest there till morning without being disturbed. We're both too old for sofa surfing."

She managed a wry smile at that, and dimples. "You're describing yourself," she said. "That's what *you* need."

"But doesn't everyone? These are the fundamentals, Maggs. There's nothing wrong with valuing the ordinary in life – I mean, especially nowadays when even the ordinary is becoming so rare."

"Granted. So, you're telling me to leave him. But why should I? My life is in that house, Mike. That was my 'ordinary'. Why should I be the one to walk out of it?"

And a fair point, except: "You told me you had another place, your mum's house."

"I also told you it's rented out."

"Then give your tenant notice."

"I... I can't. It's not that simple."

"Isn't it? Look, I really don't know who Chris Donnegan is. I've never seen him. It was you who hired me that day I wandered into the shop. So far as I'm concerned it's you who keeps everything going. That's not an easy job, but you manage it. You're good at it. Resourceful. You can achieve anything you set your mind to. You know that. But sometimes... others drain us, don't they? They steal our energy. Leave us feeling so weak we lose all belief in ourselves..."

Lesley, looked up from over the top of her Tetris game, impatient, as if we were spoiling her concentration. We forget she's there, so quiet she can render herself invisible.

"Mike'll never tell you to leave him," she said. "But I will, for what it's worth. You got another house, Maggs. Tell 'em you wannit back. In the meantime bunk up with Mike. Since you're both up shit creek, might as well paddle in the same canoe for a bit. It's just so fuckin' obvious, can't believe why you're both still muckin' about."

Maggs straightened herself at that, bristling a little at the "F" word, but also readying herself to state the obvious, or at least *an* 'obvious', one neither Lesley nor I could see. "Lesley... Mike and I..."

What? Mike and I what?

"We don't know each other that well, and Mike..."

Mike what?

"Mike's a very private person, you know? And I don't want to..."

Want to what?

"Impose..."

"Doesn't seem to mind havin' me around. And all respect to Mike, and not wanting to scare 'im or nothin' after he's bin so kind, but he's takin' a bigger risk with me than he ever would be with you."

What?

Come on, Mike, say something: "I don't... mind, Maggs. And you're not imposing. Of course you're not. And Lesley's right. We're all in a bit of a pickle at the moment, so let's see each other through it. Together. There's a room here. Same when they replace my old van. Or... there's still a week to run on the lease of the cabin, if you prefer some space. Neither option's ideal, I know. But it's better than aimlessly driving up the M6, which is what you were doing this morning."

A rabbit makes a bolt for it across the darkening green. It startles me, brings me back to the present moment, makes me wonder what I'm doing, still, way out here, pondering our conversation this afternoon, and the strange unsettling emotions it has aroused. I'm running away, I suppose, like the rabbit. I'm avoiding the van, avoiding home – not because I am displaced, but because the nature of home is changing. Not in ways I dislike either – quite the opposite. But there's no sense in becoming attached to what one cannot have.

There's another narrative opening here, concerning Maggs. You see it too, don't you? It's called the nice guy fallacy, and it runs something like this: I'm the nice guy, but only in so far as I believe I am investing in her future favours. At some point the nice guy expects... well... pussy as his reward, and she'd better give it up because he's been ever so patient with her contrary ways.

But no matter what his labours, a man has no automatic right to *that*. Will I feel used when she says no – not that I shall ever ask, you understand? But if I do, and she refuses, will there then be no more 'mister nice guy'? Will I – God help me – become a *Martin*. Apologies to Martins around the world, but you know what I mean? Such is the danger. You see it, don't you?

Of course, I don't know if I *am* that guy. I tell myself I am not, *definitely not*, but do I really know myself so well I can trust myself to be magnanimous under all circumstances? Such are the questions women, good women, make a man ask.

No, I don't want it!

Pussy, I mean.

Dammit. I told you before – didn't I? But all right, I do want a part of her. I want her to come help me fit out the new van, choose fabrics, bedding, plump the pillows, tell me this one is best, that I will sleep better on it, that she will anoint the newness of it all with the scent of Le Jardin, chase away the demons as if with temple incense. And is that not still the unreasonable demanding of her intimacy? And for all my perseverance with the craft of solitude, has the need for a woman not become, by stealth, only all the more desirable?

Maggs.

I feel better when she's around, empty when she is not. But truly it's not pussy I want. The thought of enjoying again the heights of eroticism, as with Laura, seems frankly absurd.

What do I want then?

What *do* I mean?

It's clearly something deeper. More like the myth she embodies, the dignity, the elegance, the grace, because without it, what I have lately become is ridiculous. And Maggs is human. We have already established above all else she is a real woman. Thus we circle back to the fear: what if Lesley is right? How does the nice guy narrative run when a woman actually wants him to want her pussy, when he says he does not, yet to reject it would be to reject also the far more intimate treasure of a presence he can no longer live without?

What the hell kind of story is that? Where in the annals of literature and myth do we find such a tale, complete with revision notes?

Pray God she does not want it!

I mean... she doesn't does she?

Of course she doesn't! Grow up!

And there, overwrought in the analysis of it, is the conflict at the heart of things between us now.

Do you see why I prefer to live alone?

Chapter Twenty-Six

"I'll stay 'till the weekend, if that's okay? Have a think about what I'm going to do."

"Of course, you're welcome, Maggs."

"Thanks, Mike."

She has a cardigan around her shoulders, cream Cashmere, like a figment of imagination – not a wrinkle in it. Lesley has retired to give us privacy, though we protest, perhaps too much, the mantle of lovers. Anyway this is a caravan and conversations can be heard in every room. We would have to sit out to be truly private and it's hardly the time of year for that. Still, we unconsciously moderate our tone to whispers, our heads drawn closer, all the better to hear, and to share intimacies.

"How do you bear it, Maggs?"

"Oh... like you, Mike. Dress well, paint on a smile every morning and hold your chin up."

"But..."

"We pretend. We all pretend... don't we?"

Her phone buzzes, her old phone, the one that is still the portal to her real life, not the one that links her, albeit tenuously to me. She takes it up but does not look to check for messages, switches it off. We both know or at least feel it's Martin wanting to know where she is and what the fuck she thinks she's doing, and where's his tea?

She paints back her smile, raises her chin a little. "So... when you get your life together, have you thought any more about what you intend doing with it?"

"Actually, I think I'm... going to build my house. Bricks and mortar. No more caravans for me."

"Good for you. And you'll find someone to be with? Someone to share it with?"

"I... I think I'm past all that. Too fixed in my ways to adjust to being

with someone else, Maggs. I shall keep it tidy and mow my lawns, and volunteer in the bookshop of course, if you'll still have me."

"Of course I'll still have you. I just can't imagine living alone."

"It's not so bad. Is that what you're afraid of? Being alone? But you can build a new life. New friends. Just the way you want, leaving out all the bad things you don't."

"Like you did? New friends?"

Hint of sarcasm duly noted, or do I imagine it?

"I'm different, Maggs... not sociable... people don't feature much in my life. Never have. But the main thing is, you'll be safe. And actually... I do have friends now."

"Oh?"

"Well, I mean through the bookshop. There's you of course. And Lesley, and Alan..."

"Yes... yes of course you have us. And the bookshop."

"Are you still thinking of quitting?"

"I don't know, Mike. If I'm going to stay with Martin, I may have to. He's always been a bit difficult that way."

For "difficult", I am beginning to read: "Paranoid Schizophrenic".

It's therefore looking to me increasingly untenable she should have to do that, ridiculous even she should have to consider it, but something old fashioned in me prevents me from saying so. It's not a man's place to interfere in the thought processes stringing together a woman's marriage, no matter how toxic. It's her bed, and she must lie in it, or so the popular view goes. Thus, in no other walk of life are we so condemned by indifference for present misfortunes as a result of past choices made in good faith.

The light is long gone, we have no books to absorb us here and our conversation reaches a natural ebb. Maggs bids me goodnight, drops a hand briefly onto the back of mine, sends a shockwave up my arm.

"Goodnight, Mike. And, again, thanks."

"Goodnight, Maggs. Gratitude unnecessary. But you're welcome anyway."

I listen to the quiet for a while, the click of metal as the van cools in the wind coming off the bay. There's something unsettling in it, the wind still setting up a peculiar vibration, like a warning, as there seems a warning in most things at the moment. Then I feel a shiver, someone stepping over my grave, and decide it's time I turned in.

I'm hardly expecting to sleep, but it seems I'm so tired out by the day and pole-axed by the sea air, I'm gone at once, drawn deep by the profound darkness, and the sound of the sea, and the shake of the van, and the silent presence of the women sleeping with me – well, not actually *with* me of course, but metaphorically, perhaps in the same dream space, and certainly under the same, imperceptibly ringing tin roof.

I dream of Lesley.

It's her birthday, and I have taken her to a restaurant to celebrate, one I used to frequent with Sandra in the olden days – probably gone now. Sandra again! She wears a chiffon dress with shoulder pads, hair fluffed out like an eighties diva, and she orders something French from the menu, then looks at me. I cannot read French and am struggling, embarrassed, the waiter standing over us, waiting on my decision.

"He'll have the same as me," she says, kindly, rescuing me from... something – from judgement perhaps, and certainly from ridicule. Then she raises a glass of wine, looks at me, so beautiful, and then she says: "Thanks, Dad. This is lovely."

And I realise, as you do in dreams with absolute certainty that Lesley is my love-child. Of course she is! How could I not have known before. Laura is her mother, and all of Lesley's travails up to now have been milestones on her epic journey across a wasteland of neglect and indifference to discover me. And also, as you do in dreams, I wake with a jolt at this entirely false conviction, sweating at the added complication to an already complicated turn of events, and for a long time, still in the darkness and the new scented-ness of the van, believing it all to be true.

I'm gradually rescued by the faint scent of Le Jardin, reminding me of my here-and-now, and a reality no less perplexing. It's four a.m. and I'm wide awake. I shuffle to the kitchen for a glass of water, find Maggs already there, at the table, cotton pyjamas, not unlike my own, but in a cooler shade, all

crisp creaminess of course, hardly a wrinkle, unlike mine, and her hair fluffed out and cascading about her shoulders, rather like Lesley's in the dream.

"Sorry," she says. "Did I disturb you?"

"Not at all. I was woken by an odd dream."

The embarrassment of the dream returns like a premonition – a sense of inadequacy, then there's a feeling of nakedness, my ridiculousness in these thin pyjamas, a poor disguise for who I really am, inadequate armour and all that, no zipper, nor underwear to prevent myself inadvertently flopping out in complete disgrace.

What?

Where did that one come from?

She picks up on it: "Are you all right?"

"Em... apologies... for my rather dated nightwear."

"Are you serious?"

"Yes... I think so. I... always prefer to dress properly for you, Maggs."

"Don't be silly... and me sitting here with my nipples sticking out like a blind cobbler's thumbs. How decorous is that?"

Her arms are folded snug over her bosom, so actually I cannot see, not that I want to, and now I don't know where to put my eyes, so focus on the bubbles on the side of the glass which I'm turning slowly as if screwing the lid back down onto something that's worked loose. "Em... so... sorry," I tell her. "Anyway... what's keeping you awake?"

"Thinking."

"Oh?"

"Thinking you're right, actually."

"Me? Right? Oh, dear... I wouldn't rely on that. No... definitely not."

"Seriously. Listen. You're *both* right. You and Lesley. I should leave him. It's gone on for too long, pretending everything's okay or at the

very least that it's fixable, when actually it's getting worse. The trouble is I know myself, so I know I most likely need something... a shock... a wake up... I mean before I'll do anything about it. Something that changes everything... and at this rate it's probably going to be a night in A&E."

"Oh, Maggs... not that... please. You mustn't let that happen."

"I know... so... I was thinking of a different kind of shock, actually, something I can control, but which would be no less shocking to me. And you must forgive me for speaking so plainly to you Mike... but I think I want sex, actually, with another man. I know I keep saying I don't want an affair, and I really don't. That would be too distracting right now, but sex... something uncomplicated and terribly, terribly filthy and fun. Yes. I'm thinking that's exactly what I need."

"Em... but that could be even more dangerous... I mean... getting mixed up with another man. And it's hardly necessary. Surely?"

"Potentially dangerous, I agree. Which is why I need a man I can trust. A man I already know, actually."

Is she talking about Chris Donnegan? But how can she be sure he'll go for that? She described him as a gentleman, or was it a silvery fox? Hell, Maggs, what are you thinking? Please, no,... but didn't she also say he was gay? Or maybe he goes both ways?

"Well... that all sounds very complicated. But really, I think you just need somewhere else to stay for a bit until you can get back into your mum's house. And in the meantime find yourself a good solicitor. You'd hardly be the first woman to walk out on her husband."

"Yes, yes. I know. But, I'm serious. First what I really, really need, Mike, is to break some glass, smash some crockery, some really valuable crockery. You know what I mean?"

"Well… I think I do, yes, but Maggs..."

"And I was wondering... hard part this... so, deep breath... if, after all, you could... you know? I mean... consider the possibly of helping me out... in that respect."

Forgive me – I know I'm being a little slow here. "And in what respect is that, exactly?"

"You know..." she rolls her eyes suggestively. "With me. Could you bring yourself, do you think?"

Chapter Twenty-Seven

The old van is to be plucked away by crane and taken to wherever it is old vans go to die. In the meantime it looks appalling. I am sweeping the hard-standing, tossing ancient rubble into the builder's skip that arrived this morning, in readiness for the serious clear-up. Men have been organised, pipework for new drains and conduits for electricity are ordered, ready for the new van which arrives... well... sometime... months probably. It's being fitted out in the Midlands and will be driven up the M6 on the back of a giant truck with flashing orange lights and an escort vehicle.

It seems a lot of fuss for a thing I'm still viewing as temporary, and the thought of it does not excite me at all. Were it to be constructed from double walled armour plate and bulletproof glass, I might feel differently. What I really want though are some stairs, some altitude, and a bow and arrows to pick off my tormentors. My dwelling place has been for too long now a flimsy affair. Time perhaps to armour up and do battle.

The picket fence is propped up in sections by the garage. No sense putting it back yet, at least not until the new van is in place. But now I don't know when I'll have the motivation to do it, and it seems pointless in itself until I have built myself that proper house, the one I planned on all along, though God only knows where the money's coming from.

And the motivation comes in waves, like the tide out by Plover Scar, sometimes riding high, when all things are possible and I am browsing the Huff catalogue again, sketching plans. And then the tide slips out revealing that same long level plain of depressing mud which sucks the energy right out of me.

Instead now, I clip the edges of the lawn, rumble out the mower and begin the first cut of the season – a little early I know, but the grass is dry enough, and a good five degrees warmer than it is in the Dales. But as I mow, I feel self conscious and vulnerable to every passing vehicle, feel eyes upon me, read imaginary minds.

Early for mowing, isn't it?

Wait, is that him?

Did he or didn't he?

And if he didn't, and the other one didn't either, where is she?

Where is Grace Milner?

Good question!

I wonder if Melvyn is going through the same process this morning. I doubt it. Avarice and painful self awareness are not common bedfellows. And of course what I'm avoiding most of all here, is Maggs.

Maggs!

Maggs, for God's sake! What were you thinking?

There's something therapeutic in the rumble of this ancient mower, and the scent of grass, but again, a warning in the sharp odour of petrol I carelessly splashed around the filler cap. I mean this in the metaphorical sense of course. I am not expecting the mower to burst into flames and me with it, but still... something... like there's something suddenly terrifying about Maggs, which is why I'm away from the coast so early, leaving a note on the kitchen table:

Got to head over to Middleton, tidy up the grounds a bit. Talk later.

And say what, Mike?

"But Maggs, I can't possibly... do *that!*"

"You don't find me sufficiently attractive?"

"But that's... that's not the issue. I mean, of course I do... you're a very attractive woman... but... we can hardly... I mean... what with Lesley being around."

"Is that your only objection?"

No, but it was the only one I could put words to at the time. All the others were unspeakable.

"I don't mean right now," she said, blushing. "Heavens, no. That would be a little... precipitous. No I'd like it be a more considered act. Something almost theatrical, or a ritual even. I was thinking we could go to the cabin by the river again, tomorrow night perhaps? stay till Friday? See how it goes. What do you say?"

And what did I say?

"Maggs... I... I don't think I can be that way with you. I mean, not so casually as that. I've not been with any woman since Sandra, and that was a lifetime ago. What I'm trying to say, actually, is it wouldn't be a small thing for me. And with you... especially... I mean that would be rather a daunting prospect."

"Oh?"

"To be intimate with you, Maggs..."

"I know it's a lot to ask. And on the one hand it might seem rather... undignified. A little wanton, actually, but that's the whole point of it, do you see?... the wantonness of it, the point being it's so out of character. I've never cheated on Martin, never dreamed of it but now I think I need to. And desperately."

Undignified? Yes, I'm thinking that as well. Sordid even, were the whole thing not so premeditated. And the premeditation makes it what? Even worse? Or do I mean exciting?

No... not exciting, Mike. Don't even think it.

"But on the other hand," she continues. "It needn't be like that at all."

"Oh?"

"I'd want it to be... just so. You see?"

"Just so?"

"I mean the sex."

"Em..."

"And... sorry again to be so blunt about it, but another man might not be so compliant in this. And you don't seem to mind me telling you what I want."

"You mean, me being so submissive and everything?"

"Well, exactly... I wouldn't want it to be the usual thing, you know? I mean a couple of minutes of huffy puffy while the man gets his end away, or

whatever the vernacular is these days, and I lie there afterwards in a wet patch feeling totally let down, while he turns over and snores the night away."

"Em... Maggs... perhaps we should… I mean shouldn't..."

"Oh, don't worry, Lesley's fast asleep by now."

"Still..."

"I mean... that's sort of how it's always been for me, you know?"

It was as if my beloved aunt, God bless her, had begun discussing oral sex in her eighties. My reaction would have been the same. I was almost certain we should not have been having that conversation.

"Listen, Mike, have you never read one of those... you know... Bonkbuster books? They're really quite sparky. Well, some of them are. Most are rather childish of course."

"Hardly my genre, Maggs."

"Pity... but I remember you said you've read 'O'?"

"Well, yes... "

"Same thing then, but a bit lighter. Not so nihilistic. I could dress up in a leather Basque, some bright red lipstick, and you could... well... smack my bottom, call me a 'dirty bitch', things like that?"

"Absolutely not, Maggs! No, I'm sorry. That's completely out of the question."

"Well... how about I smack your bottom? I don't mind... and you keep telling me you're not a prude or anything."

"No! That's even worse. Look, I don't find that sort of thing at all... erotic."

She found that admission curious "Not even remotely?"

"No."

But if that was true, then why of a sudden was I so startlingly erect? Worse I had apparently torpedoed my way out of my pyjamas, under cover of the table-top, and I was going to have a terrible job wriggling

myself back in without her noticing. It was just hearing Maggs... talking so frankly about... well... *things.*

"I am not... smacking your bottom, Maggs, or any other part of you for that matter. I'm sorry. And if this is the first time I've refused you anything, then so be it. Look, I do understand. Your... intimate life doesn't sound as if it's been so grand. But you don't need to go that far in order to experience... well,.. you know, something more... satisfying. And so far as I'm concerned when a man touches a woman he should be respectful."

"Respectful? Yes... I know what you mean, and that's so very *you*, Mike. And all right, in foreplay, but once it's 'game on', surely anything goes?"

"Well... to a point, I suppose... but we would have to know each other very well, I mean before *anything*... went."

"All right. I'm sorry. But are you saying you'll at least think about it?"

Did I say that? When did I say that?

It's the easiest option, Mike... to say you'll think about it. Then forget it and hope it goes away. I manage a half nod.

"Thank you. And if not you, then I suppose I'll have to find someone else, walk into a bar or something. I'm sure it's not that difficult, even for someone my age. Some men will shag anything, especially when they're drunk."

She's playing with me now, playing on my sympathies, trying to firm my evasive promise into something more concrete. "But Maggs, that sort of thing... what you're talking about... it can be really dangerous with the wrong man. Promise me you won't do that."

The thought of her walking into a bar alone and picking up stray wolves and telling them to hit her alarmed me and it didn't make sense – I mean the hitting being the problem in the first place. Could she really be so reckless and contrary? Could I not just say yes, all right, Maggs, I'll smack your bottom, call you a filthy bitch?

"Do try to sleep, Maggs. I'm sure you'll feel differently in the morning."

"You've done so much for me already, Mike and it seems an outrageous thing to ask. But you were once quite a... well quite a ladies man... or so I was thinking... and hardly bound by the usual rules. I just thought you might...

that's all."

"Ladies man? But Maggs – that was,... that was a mixture of misunderstanding and cowardice... my love-life was like an Ealing Comedy. It was a mistake, and I've spent my whole life feeling guilty for it."

"And I've told you I forgive you. But you'll definitely think about it? Say you'll sleep on it?"

She wants her answer soon then, like in the morning. "All right. I'll... sleep on it. But you should do the same. And I'm sure you'll feel differently."

I don't hear the car approach. I'm wearing ear defenders, still lost in memories of that last alarming conversation with Maggs, and my back is turned, but when I face about to make the return cut, then I see it, bold and black and shiny. Black windows. A Range Rover or something of the sort, of the kind favoured by televisual gangsters.

I cannot see the occupants but I guess they are looking at me. I ignore them, turn the mower and make the up-cut. When I turn again, it's still there, so I let the engine die, lean on the bars and wait, eyes upon the glass, blind to these, my latest oppressors, but eyeballing them in defiance anyway.

They're wondering where I hid the body perhaps. But I have other things to think about, after all. Things I am trying not to think about... like the image of Maggs in a leather Basque and fishnet stockings, shaking her bottom at me, inviting the flat of my hand.

Yes, I know – she never mentioned fishnets. Both they and the shaking of her bottom are my own prurient invention.

Hell, Maggs. I don't want to think of you this way!

So... what is it now? This has not the feel of swine things, nor casual thuggery. Is it the cops, come to invite me for questioning again? A man gets out, short, stout, fifties, long black badass coat and a careless thatch of unfeasibly dark hair.

"Hello, Mike."

I think I know him. Yes… he used to supervise the watchmen at the foundry – what they later put in uniforms and called 'security'.

What was his name?

"Vic? Vic Bartlet?"

Yes, Vic Bartlet! Pedantic little bastard, once refused me access to the office because I'd forgotten my badge, though I'd worked there thirty years and presumed by then everyone knew who I was, that I was not a thief nor an industrial spy. So I went home for it, missed an early morning conference call, lost a contract. He got a promotion. I got a bollocking. He was forever then to me a symbol of the hollowing out of values – that perhaps the foundry, indeed my country was a lost cause long before it actually became unprofitable.

But I really don't want to be thinking about that now.

"What can I do for you Vic?"

"Heard about your spot of bother, Mike."

"Oh? Well, you and half the country. What are you up to these days?"

"I'm working for George Milner."

"Do I know him?"

"Grace Milner's father."

"Ah."

"He's... sorry for your trouble, mate."

Mate? We were never mates. 'Mate', in this context, is the softener, the misdirection. Now I'm waiting for the knee in the balls, which I hope he gets around to quickly because I really want to finish my mowing before it rains.

"He'd like to speak to you, about Grace."

"I don't know anything, Vic."

"We're trying to piece together the puzzle, you know? And he'd like to see if there's anything he can do... for you, I mean, financially. Put things right for you. Terrible mess all this, and not your fault, mate."

This makes no sense. I've only recently been demoted from number one suspect in Grace Milner's disappearance, and already her father wants to be

my friend and benefactor. The hint of 'financial assistance' then, in this context can be read as an inducement.

Vic always did have a sinister demeanour, one he did little to discourage. There were rumours that before he came to the foundry he was in Ireland, this would be in the later nineteen eighties, army intelligence, interrogating Republicans. Others say he was the one who started those rumours. Whatever the facts of the matter, I still have the scent of warning in my nostrils, smell also deception, and half truths.

"Well, as you can see, I'm not really up to receiving visitors these days."

"Appreciate that, Mike. No, he'd like you to come see him. I can take you to his place. Only ten minutes away. Bring you right back."

"You mean now?"

"If it's convenient."

"Well, I'd like to help, Vic. But I told the police everything I know, which isn't much. He'd be better talking to them."

"Thing is, we think the police are being a bit slow, you know? He's beside himself, Mike. Hasn't left the house since it happened, in case someone calls – I mean whoever's got her. Like."

"Someone calls? You think she's been kidnapped? Is that what the police are saying now?"

"It's a theory. He's a wealthy man. You wouldn't believe how wealthy. Makes sense, wouldn't you say? Unless you know different?"

"You think *I* might have kidnapped her?"

"No, don't be ridiculous. I know you. I told him, told George, that was all nonsense, you getting picked up that way. I said: I know Mike Garatt from the old days. You were a legend back at the foundry, Mike. The police have no idea, that's what's so worrying. And it's weeks now. They've moved on, parked it for want of leads, you know? Meanwhile Grace is still missing."

I was a legend? There's only one thing worse than an attempt at bribery and that's being so transparently and creepily buttered up. "If you'll forgive me Vic... if you know I'd nothing to do with it, why are you wasting time talking to me?"

"We're grasping at straws, Mike. Any little piece of information's like gold to us. We just want to hear your story. Small details, may not seem important to you, but could mean everything to us. Will you help?"

Small details like the fact Grace Milner runs a secret blog, calls herself Misstikkal Muse, and has definitely not been kidnapped?

I should know better than to get into that Black Maria and be driven away by a man who's already treated me poorly, a man who in the span of a moment has tried to buy me, then flatter me into compliance. There are probably villains waiting inside with tie-wraps and gaffer tape and stun guns to render me senseless. Then I'll wake up in a basement with a single naked light-bulb and Vic pulling on forensic gloves prior to beating me to a pulp for information I don't possess.

Except the mob-genre is not my forte, so you mustn't worry about that, but neither is bondage and sado-masochism. I really wouldn't know where to begin with either narrative, and especially not with Maggs as the bound, busty heroine with the ripped bodice. And I'm sure she doesn't mean it.

I mean... she can't really mean it, can she?

But at least my disappearance into the world of the crime genre would, for a time, save me having to write any more about the other. It comes down to whichever I'd find least embarrassing.

So...

Here we go.

Chapter Twenty-Eight

We approach Hammerton House from the old quarry road, off Clover Lane. Not much gives it away, just a bit of recently repaired drystone wall with a modest plaque inlaid, quite low-key really. But then you come to an industrial mesh gate festooned with hideous 'keep out' signage: Private Property, Trespassers will be Prosecuted, 24 hour CCTV – that sort of thing.

The gate lets on to a neat apron of tarmac, and a building where a uniformed guard comes out to inspect us before opening up a second slow rolling gate, stout enough to stop an armoured car. There's razor wire on top and cameras pointing every which-way from tall poles that are themselves wrapped in razor wire.

A road leads down through old quarry workings, which stand like a man-made canyon now, their heights crowned by a double fence, the space between which forms a broad no man's land patrolled, say the signs, by dogs. All it's lacking are periodic watch towers and guards with machine guns.

None of this is visible to casual scrutiny, and something of a revelation to me, having used this as a place of wilderness adventure in my childhood. I note a pair of drones following the line of the fence, a kind of aerial robot patrol. It's all quite sinister. I wonder if I shall ever be seen again, and should I squeeze a quick message off to Maggs, just in case.

Perhaps I should have stuck to the erotic narrative after all.

At the bottom of a steeply terraced defile I recognise the old delph we used to swim in as kids, now transformed into an ornamental lake, and to one side of it, newly turfed lawns run up to what is both the biggest, and the most imposingly ugly house I have ever seen. It's vastness and its ostentatious tastelessness are an assault on the senses. Or it may just be that to my mind even modern palatial abodes must conform to the Austenesque Neo Classical cliche.

Close by there is a helicopter pad, domed hangar, and a garage the size of an industrial unit. Trees have been planted, or rather transplanted from elsewhere, fully grown, and there is a hive of activity, contractors with JCB's still hard-landscaping the surrounding rock, gardeners planting...

As we cruise down to the house the whole of it opens up and resembles a vast movie set... like the headquarters of a bond villain or, less fanciful, like the

biggest self-imposed prison one can imagine.

This is where Grace lived?

"Fuuuuuck..."

Vic approves. It's probably a common reaction of first time visitors. "I know," he says. "Stunning isn't it?"

"It's... certainly impressive, Vic."

Impressively bleak I mean, like the surface of the moon is impressive, yet incapable of supporting life. And the overt security, the vast runs of vicious wire, and threat of dogs, and shouty notices, and arrays of cameras all speak of a maniacal and highly visible paranoia.

"So... you do what for him, exactly?"

"I run his security."

"Does he keep gold bullion here or something?"

"What? Don't be daft. No... all this is just for his *personal* security."

"Has he upset some very bad people?"

Actually, what I'm thinking is: is he some sort of gangster, or a drug lord? Except, this is England. We don't have them here, do we?

Of course we do. And worse.

"No... no.... He's just rich, Mike... like top one hundred in the world."

"So... he keeps a butler and everything?" Stupid question, but I've run out of sensible things to say about anything so patently absurd as this.

"About twenty household staff, full time," he says: "Chef, secretary, cleaners... gardeners, handymen. I think what you might once have called a butler, you'd call a personal assistant nowadays."

"I used to swim in that delph as a kid."

"So did I. Long time ago. Dangerous in those days too – deep and dark and very cold. One of my mates drowned in it. George... he had it drained, filled,

lined with concrete. It's no more than six feet deep anywhere now and clear as crystal. And the water's heated all year round with a massive geothermal pump. It can be minus ten outside but the water's always a steady twenty two. Cost millions it did. Nothing else like it in the world."

There's a helicopter on the pad, red and cream livery, a uniformed pilot stepping down, lantern jawed, like Dan Dare. For a man who hasn't left the house in weeks, he seems to have lots of transportation on standby.

"Travels much, does he?"

"All the time. Most nights he flies over to the Isle of Man. He has another place like this over there. If he stayed here all the time they'd class it as being resident in the UK you see? Then the taxman would hammer him."

"Is that... legal?"

"Sure it's legal, Mike."

All right, it was a stupid question. Only poor people pay taxes. "So... he's away most nights, like... last night?"

"Not sure about last night, but most nights... yes."

Obviously Vic cares little if his lies add up or not. George Milner hasn't left the house in weeks, he said, yet flies out to his other palace in Manx-land most nights. I wonder if it is equally well fortified. And who his enemies are.

"So he's had all this done... and he doesn't actually live here? Just pops over now and then?"

"You could put it like that. It's more for business, guests, impressing clients, that sort of thing. It was Gracie who lived here most of the time."

Gracie?

"Alone?"

"Well, except for when that little twat of a boyfriend of hers came over. I still think he had something to do with it. Confused us no end when the cops pulled you in instead."

Strange how no one likes Melvyn. I detect a curious mix of contempt and jealousy in Vic's tone, suspect I was not the only one to fall in love with

Grace, suspect also I may have been the only one of us to rationalise it into myth. Vic, however, still harbours an unhealthy attachment.

How do I know this? I told you, I read minds. Doesn't mean I'm always right. But perhaps I should rethink my position regarding Melvyn. "None of the stories in the papers about Grace mentioned any of this."

"They'd've got around to it, but the papers were told to play it down. We got to most of the social media stuff too before it got out of hand."

"Told?"

"George told them."

"Didn't look like they were too constrained when they were going after me, Vic."

"No... sorry about that, Mike. It was a... useful distraction, all that. Which is why George would like to make amends, if you'll let him. Just talk to him, Mike..."

This revelation does little to improve my mood, it also puts a different spin on things. "A wealthy young woman like that, Vic. She could be anywhere in the world. Perhaps she just needed a bit of..."

"Bit of what? Rough? Dick? What?" He's sensitive, jumpy...

"No, Vic. I was thinking... space. Perhaps she just needed a bit of space."

Clearly this existential subtlety is lost on him. "Last seen leaving your shop though, Mikey."

He calls me Mikey. Is this to be familiar and friendly, or to taunt me with uninvited liberties? It doesn't matter. We're at cross purposes here. Vic is infected with the paranoia of this place, this ostentatious wealth, and assumes no other possibility than she was taken against her will. He suspects violence, if only because that is the narrative he is employed to guard against. But I look around me and I see someone in Grace who must have been unimaginably lonely.

My name is Grace and I am a lie.

It's making more sense now, fitting a different story altogether. This is a more ancient myth: the trap of ostentatious wealth. It's like poverty in reverse, and

both of them impossible to escape. The former devours the material body, the latter devours the soul – eye of a needle and all that. But while I'm familiar enough with plenty of wishful and unlikely rags to riches stories, I come up short trying to think of any that go the other way, finding happiness in rags, having once known wealth such as this. The money will always poison you, sap your courage to abandon it in exchange for weeds. Won't it?

And weeds is not the answer for the rich. For the rich the answer is to face up to the responsibility of wealth. Suddenly, Grace interests me anew.

"She worked as a lecturer, Vic. That's a hard job, stressful... why do that when she didn't need to?"

"Because she wanted to. Oh... crazy, sure... but she's young. You know what it's like at that age, all idealistic, wanting to do good. George indulged her. He even thought it would be good for her to struggle a bit, then she'd appreciate more what she'd got. Anyway... here we are. Tradesman's entrance. Hope you don't mind. Only serious money gets to use the front door."

No, I don't mind. I am only wondering as I step out of the car, what it is that causes money to flood into vast piles like this, especially at times of severe want, when others have nothing and must discard their pride and beg for cups of tea. How did George Milner acquire his billions?

I mean, it must be billions, right?

We're walking along a corridor, scent of new plaster and floor polish, Chinese patterned urns occupy alcoves every few paces, each of them lit – an attempt at classical decor, but half hearted somehow and cold, like tired museum exhibits. Our footsteps ring hollow. Vic moves powerfully, upright, like an old soldier and its hard to keep up with him. He seems very self assured, but if it's true and he's in charge of personal security, then he's in serious trouble here and needs a result. He needs to find her fast. But Grace is hiding. And now I know who from, or more precisely from what. Or at least this is the story I am writing for her… for now.

"How do you know she was last seen leaving the shop?"

"Cos we had eyes on her."

"You mean she was followed? Routinely?"

"Damn right. Middleton's a real scummy place nowadays, never know who's knocking about, do you?"

"Did she know?"

"Mostly not. Now and then she spotted it. Sharp one is Gracie. Made us promise to keep away. So we promised. Sacked the security team and got another, better. They'd been on her for months and she never noticed... never kicked off about it, anyway."

"Team?"

"Two or three, in rotation. It's how it works, Mikey."

Vic is talking too much, showing off, revealing his importance, his influence, his position in this hierarchy of precious insanity and I don't understand why. Real security men are usually more tight lipped about their business. But anyway... I'm disturbed by the news, and not thinking too well. Grace Milner had covert protection! Is this a spy story now? Is it not the police I am evading, but the spectre of well funded private security arseholes, like Vic Bartlet?

I'm being shown into a panelled room, a room with a view of the most expensive lake in the world, and Vic is telling me to wait here, but I call after him, one last question, as Columbo used to say: "Hang on... if she was under surveillance, and she gave you the slip... you do know that means..."

I note Vic's magnanimity, his joviality, is ebbing now he's got me here. I note also a look of impatience at my continued questioning, and I suppose at my undisguised exasperation. "It means whoever did it, Mikey, was good," he says, as if addressing a child. "Foreign maybe, ex intelligence. Maybe even Russian."

"Russian? Don't be daft..."

"Look, best not to think about it. I've already told you more than you need to know. George has his theories. So you just tell him your story like a good lad, and then we're done. Okay? And I'll take you back to mowing your bit of grass."

Condescending now. Ah, yes. This is more like the Vic I knew.

"Do the police know she was being watched?"

Vic ducks the question. "Tell him your story. Then forget you were ever here. Oh... by the way... I need your phone."

"What?"

"George is paranoid about 'em. Sorry."

Paranoid? Him and me both then, but for different reasons. My phone is locked but it's possible Vic may have a way of getting inside of it.

"There's no way you're having my 'phone, Vic."

"Just for safe-keeping, Mikey. That's all. Trust me."

Trust him? No way, but I tip it up all the same. Maggs is right, I'm too submissive.

He'll not find much of interest, just Maggs' number, and Lesley's. I have also told the phone to delete even this meagre data if the pin code is fluffed but once. But he may have a way around that, and planting in it a way of getting it to betray my whereabouts to him all the time, maybe even to eavesdrop. As usual with technology, if it's a possibility, it's as well to assume it's already a fact. Is this the real reason I've been brought here? So his people can plant something in my phone and keep tabs on me?

Paranoia, Mike.

No matter, I'll discard it later. At this rate I'm going to be bankrupted buying pay-as-you-go burners.

Vic leaves with my phone and I sit down to wait. But George Milner is in no hurry. I'm waiting in that room for an age and eventually bored by that view of the most expensive lake in the world. Twenty two degrees summer or winter. More interesting to me is there's a bookcase to investigate, and I'm already halfway to it when I realise it's not a case of books at all, but some other form of cabinet disguised with genuine bookends. The books, such as they once were, have been slaughtered and their scalps hung out for display.

What does this tell me? What does it tell you?

I fumble for my phone, realise I no longer have it.

"Mr. Garatt?"

It's a woman's voice, I turn to find a petite and rather pretty Japanese woman, red suit, clipboard and a severe expression. "Mr Milner is unable to speak

with you. He was not expecting you so soon. Will you be seated?"

I'm not sure if her rude manner is an imagined artefact of her accented English. I don't think it is, because the eyes do not smile. This not a smiling woman. She is severe, business like, and not at all pleased at having to deal with me.

"If it's inconvenient for you, I'll leave, but I was under the impression George Milner wanted to see me urgently to the extent of actually sending a car to fetch me."

She avoids the facts. "Yes... but for now I will have to do. I am Melissa, his Personal Assistant."

Answering questions, facing facts are not a priority for the denizens of Hammerton House, nor politeness. She does not offer a hand to shake. It's unprofessional, this lack of etiquette, at least in so far as I once understood the professions. Either way it's very disappointing. I take a seat. No tea is offered. One does not become as rich as this by offering free tea, I suppose.

She has a list of questions. At first I am excited by them, I mean at the prospect of what I might learn from them, learn what the underlying preoccupations are in the mind of the questioner. But they turn out to be dull, unimaginative, pointless even, and I am left with the queer feeling that what preoccupies the questioner is actually nothing other than my detention.

It's rather a cold affair, actually. She asks the questions and I answer, and they are not half as searching as Seacombe's. When did I last see Grace? Had we ever spoken before? Do I recall what she was wearing? Have we spoken since?

She asks me this in various ways several times.

Spoken?

Of course not, I tell her. And since she does not ask if I now have a secret web address belonging to Grace, I do not tell her. Indeed I feel such a deep contempt for the whole thing I am pleased to enter battle on Grace's behalf – or at least not betray her to her oppressors.

Or does my imagination run away with me?

Time is passing, and we're getting nowhere. Meanwhile the story of Grace's life is reforming in my head. I admit I was expecting the worst of George

Milner, a conspicuously rich bastard, bombastic, rude, and uncultured. The usual cliche, I suppose. But I had already chastised myself for it, been prepared to accept the opposite, this being a sensitive man, stock-broker perhaps, power-broker, a banker, shipping magnate or something, self made... a generally good man, wealth thrust upon him, anonymous benefactor of many charities and all that, but flawed in some small way, as we are all flawed, all of us human.

But only money gets to meet the man, so I'll never know for sure.

Why am I here? I mean really. What do they want from me?

There's a picture of a super-yacht on the wall. It looks like a battleship. I imagine it cruising into port, wherever such vessels congregate to show off to one another. It has an air of: blow your super-yacht out of the water with this one, loser!

"Is that George Milner's?"

Her brief is very narrow, does not permit such conversational deviations. I wonder if he's watching, perhaps listening on the iPhone she has placed between us on the coffee table. She permits me a half nod by way of confirmation. Why are we so suspicious of deceit all the time? It's the way of the world, I suppose, Mikey, the way of money. It's just unfortunate you were born yesterday, otherwise you might be capable of keeping up with it.

"Wow!... that's amazing!"

I trust, if indeed he is listening, he has an ear for irony.

As if in reply, her phone gives a little buzz and a shake. She glances at it, clicks it off, looks aside. I can tell from her expression we're done now. I have one more exasperated question, but I know better than to ask it. Anyway I already know the answer. It's obvious: Grace has done this before.

Talk of kidnap, of violence, of Russian gangsters is a fiction for my benefit. She's hiding from this place, and they think I know where she is, or might lead them to her. This interview with the red suited woman was a deceit; for sure all they wanted was to get their hands on my phone!

She rises, still does not offer her hand. The door opens silently and Vic is waiting on the other side.

Chapter Twenty-Nine

The rolling gate clangs ponderously shut and the mesh one is swung open by a sour faced little bruiser of a man, thus permitting my exit from this eerie place, this rich man's nest. Unimaginably rich. George Milner. M'Lord Milner of Middleton.

But Middleton is just this provincial town "ap norf", become poor of late, scummy, a period of terminal decline touching down now into the cesspit of drug culture. Yet by comparison with what I've just seen beyond those gates, it is also a place teeming with life, with vitality, and – albeit unrealised – potential. The revelation is almost, I don't know... Biblical. All the town needs is hope, and purpose.

It begs the question: What's a man like that doing building his palace here? But think about it, Mike: it's not really a palace. It's just an expensive property, surrounded by barbed wire. It only looks palatial to you because you live in a caravan.

Still, I feel an immense relief at shrugging this thing off, heavy and terribly tragic barf-scented blanket of a thing. I'm relieved I did not meet him, actually, did not gaze upon his fake-tanned, fake haired, exuberantly moneyed countenance.

So... Grace left this place every morning on her way to teach at the college, a job she didn't need, but one she'd worked for and wanted all the same. Did she feel a similar relief as she drove away?

But she couldn't escape, not really. The money followed her in the guise of an hourly-rated security detail, one whose obscenely voyeuristic scrutiny she spent her life trying to shake off, because her father was paranoid about kidnap and ransom. Or at least, as usual, this is the story I make up for her.

I suspect she succeeded in giving them the slip more than once, but why this time risk her fragile freedom by opening a conduit of precarious communication with me? Mike Garatt, charity bookshop volunteer? And what chance does she have anyway, of an ordinary life, beyond those armoured gates? She was born into money, already corrupted by it. Yet still, I presume, this is her aim.

An ordinary life.

Interesting narrative, anyway. We'll run with it for now, even if it turns out

not to be true.

But let's consider the practicals: did she transfer money to another account she could use on the outside? And how do you do that anonymously with banks so paranoid these days about the laundering of dirty money. And then how much would you want? How little would you risk? Would you double that to make sure? How much, if you'd been rich, would you consider to be the absolute minimum you could survive off. How much if you'd been born poor?

And what would be the point?

You can't simply disappear into England any more, unless it's to the streets. And even an ordinary life is to struggle, it is to save over its entirety what these people would drop on fun in single weekend. But this is nonsense. Bank transferred money is all traceable. They would have found her by now – unless she's living off a reserve of cash, squirrelled away since childhood perhaps? She keeps it in a shoe-box under her bed, wherever her bed is now.

This doesn't work, Mike. The story lurches into farce!

Vic hands me my phone. It's full of fingerprints, suggesting it has indeed been much pawed over, that while I was detained in the room with the view by the red suited woman, he had some super-hacker-genius-stereotype attempt to pin a tail on the donkey. Me being the donkey, or the ass, whichever description you prefer.

"You lied, Vic."

"Don't know what you mean, Mikey."

"You gave me the impression of a man grieving over the loss of his missing daughter, a man who hasn't slept in weeks, shuttered in a dark room waiting by a telephone, a man desperate for any crumb of news."

"Your point?"

"It's not like that at all is it? He sent his PA instead with a list of dumb questions you could have asked me yourself without dragging me away from my mowing."

"Yea... look... sorry about that. He got called away at the last minute."

Oh, what's the point, Mike? Let him think you're an idiot. Sometimes there is

the greater safety in it.

"Well... I hope you got what you wanted, anyway."

"Oh... sure... sure we did. Thanks."

"Fine... best of luck then. You can drop me here, actually. Just this side of the canal."

"Really?"

"Yes. A walk will do me good."

He pulls up directly, sets me down like he's glad to be rid of me. I manage a parting glance at him. I don't expect an old pro, an arch deceiver like him to look at all sheepish, but I'd expected, I don't know... something.

"See you then, Mikey. Mind how you go."

"Cheers, Vic. Nice... em... bumping in to you."

When he's gone I skim the phone into the canal.

Paranoid. Yes, I think we've established that. But I'm not the only one. Indeed my own paranoia pales to insignificance. I had thought extreme wealth would bestow an infinite self-confidence. But from what I saw and felt at Hammerton House was akin to sickness – this need of the rich to go on striving to buy their immortality, not realising in fact they are already dead.

It's left me with an unclean feeling that won't go away. I try to walk it off, burn it out through the ache in my shins, find myself at Freshways for coffee where I buy yet another phone and a sim-card. And the first person I call, naturally enough, is the only person who can block this sickly experience out of my mind.

"Hi Maggs, it's me."

"Mike?"

"Yes... different number I know. Confusing. New Phone. Long story. Tell you about it when I see you. So, how do you feel today?"

"In myself, or what we talked about last night?"

"Both."

"In myself, I'm fine. Thanks for asking. As for last night, I feel the same. What about you? Have you thought about it much?"

A cautious beginning – a little guarded.

Thought of little else.

It's like we're discussing attending a book fair – something passionless about it, but I find such aloofness intoxicating, as if challenging me to raise a moan of erotic longing, and I imagine likewise this is her intent. Thus are we lured to perdition. But a book fair would be fine, actually. Indeed, I would love to think of accompanying Maggs on one of those occasional junkets she talks about: corporate hotel, separate rooms of course, book chat and – all right – a little mild flirtation over dinner. I imagine all eyes upon her, and me smug in the knowledge I am her company. But not in *that* way, you understand.

I wonder.

I wonder if any of us understands love any more. Does it even exist? I mean as the great romantics wrote about it, that to a man truly in love, sex is irrelevant, that the connection is deeper, spiritual, existential, lasts the span of an entire life, several lives maybe – and to a man in that kind of love, a mere woman cannot hope to respond. Yet still he desires it, blind-eyes it in anticipation of being proved wrong.

Intermediate conclusion, yes, all right, I think I am in love with Maggs.

But it only makes this all the harder. She wants to be promiscuous with me, to burst the airless balloon of her marriage with the sharp pin of a single and markedly colourful transgression, that's all – not have me treat her as my queen, not have me call her *darling*. I know, that's all a little overblown, I suppose, and as usual, possibly not even true. But I do want to be with her, dammit. I want to be enveloped by her grace, by her spirit, to wake each morning to the scent of Le Jardin. Is that so very difficult to understand?

So...

"Mike? You still there?"

"Yes."

"What are you thinking?..."

"Thinking?"

"About, *you know*... what we talked about."

"I'm thinking... if it's what you want to do, and I can't persuade you not to do it, then obviously I'd rather it was me you did it with than anyone else."

"Oh? Complicated answer – take me a while to work that one out. So is it yes or no?"

"It's a yes. But it can't be like you said. Not exactly. I can't do it that way, Maggs."

"Oh? No handcuffs, then?"

She's playing with me, trying to ease my nervousness. Can she hear the tremor in my voice? "I don't believe you mentioned handcuffs before."

"Didn't I?"

"No, definitely not. Maggs, it may be I'm too gentle a man for what you want. Have you considered that?"

"I have, actually. But I'm open to suitable alternatives. Can I at the very least wear my leather basque?"

"You brought one with you?"

"No, I'm joking. I don't have one. No handcuffs either. I do have red lipstick though."

One last try: "Maggs... could we not just take a walk by the river, eat together, talk about... I don't know... books or something?"

"That sounds very nice, Mike. Yes, I'd like to do that with you, but mostly right now what I need is to transgress. Seriously and unambiguously *transgress*. And not just a five minute fumble in the stockroom, either."

"The stockroom?"

"You've never thought about it? Those quiet times in the shop? I used to think about it a lot actually."

"What?... with me?"

"Of course with you. But they're just fantasies... no harm in them."

It's one revelation after the other, and barely the time to recover between them. "Em... I'll meet you in the Dales then. Can you square it with Lesley? She'll be okay?"

"Already have. And she'll be fine."

"Then, I'll see you later. But Maggs?..."

"Yes, Mike?"

"Can you tell me exactly what is it you want from me?"

"Already have, Mike. I want you to come and fuck my brains out."

Interim conclusion: Maggs is definitely more Laura than Sandra, though she sounds wistful, as if for an experience more often imagined than realised. She would have done better to study my CV a little more closely before inviting me to such a party as that, however. But so be it! After coffee I make a detour to the ladieswear section, my legs still shaking from her parting confirmation. There I purchase a smooth cotton scarf, paisley patterned, heavy on the red.

Red, like her lipstick.

The colour of sex.

Chapter Thirty

But before we go rushing into all of that, I still have a long walk back to the van, or maybe not...

"Might we offer you a lift, Mr Garatt?"

Black Mazda saloon, dark tinted windows, Seacombe in the back, window down, nonchalant expression, plain clothed officer at the wheel with a Cyborg plug in his ear. Yes, it's a good walk from the supermarket to the van, plenty of time I'm thinking, to contemplate my upcoming and possibly self-destructive tryst with Maggs. However, I've barely left the carpark and my interloper is already cruising up, offering me a ride, one I'm assuming I cannot refuse.

What's happening here Mike? Never have you been so popular as you are now. And you're always being driven the wrong direction.

"Actually it would be quicker if we went that way..."

"Oh, we'll just cruise around a bit while we chat, shall we?"

It's not a question, not an invitation, but it doesn't bother me much. The police scare me less now than an imagined society under the rule of Vic Bartlet's Private Security Arseholes.

I settle back. It's a nice car, quiet inside, with both an expansive and expensive air about it, but I notice a scuff of mud on the carpet, and the driver's jacket is of a cheap material, the shoulder wrinkled. It's a curious juxtaposition. I had always imagined the functions of the State as being potentially the most opulent, at least in their fabric, but the power has shifted to the Milord Milners, rendering us all poor cousins now, fodder to a many headed monster we shall be a long time enduring. I'm told psychopaths make the most persuasive money-men, and the rest of us are too passive to call them out.

The rest is inevitable.

I'm tempted to imagine Seacombe feels the same, for he has about him this morning an air of defeat.

"Am I allowed to ask how you knew where I was?"

"Facial recognition." he says. "Cameras picked you up entering the supermarket."

I don't know if I should believe him. Perhaps I should, but discover instead I am only relieved my current phone has not yet been compromised, that it was the supermarket security computers that dobbed me in. After all I've only had the phone for half an hour. Haven't even switched it on or put the SIM in.

What now, Mike? Distraction, misdirection: "Em... does it really work, that stuff?"

"Mostly not," he admits. "Lots of false positives, but it's coming along."

"I suppose it must be."

"You know, they're currently experimenting with algorithms that claim to detect criminal tendencies, or whether one is likely to be a subversive, a child molester, even whether one is to the left or the right of the political divide. All of it depending on how close together are one's eyes. Saves an awful lot of time if we can lock people up before they've actually done anything."

"Yes, I've read something of the sort myself. Technology is outstripping even the ability of science fiction to keep pace in creating one vile dystopia after another. And is it at all wise do you think?"

"Oh... absolutely not. Bound to end in disaster, but it seems to have found you all right, in spite of your attempt at a beard."

"Clearly I need to give it another few weeks before being seen out in public."

Actually, I'm thinking I need to shave it off… for Maggs.

"Oh, I wouldn't worry. All of that seems to be blowing over for you now, but still you appear... guarded, Mr Garatt."

"Do you blame me? You must admit you rather took advantage of me last time we met. And our little chat, leaked to the press as it was, ushered in a chain of events that culminated in my being literally burned from house and home. I think that's sufficient grounds for remaining on my toes when I'm around you, wouldn't you say?"

"Yes... regrettable all of that of course. I trust you don't hold us in any way responsible?"

"Well, how else did the press get my name? By the way, is it normal to have my face in your system? I mean my never having been charged with anything?"

"As a person of interest it's quite normal. And the press have their own sources of course, but I'd be wary of pursuing a complaint against us. I'm not saying you wouldn't be justified, only that we can be very stubborn, you know? By the way, a solicitor's been trying to ring you, he's left several messages on your answer-phone."

He tells me this so I know they've been monitoring my number – my old number. Does he do this to intimidate? I wonder when they realised I was no longer using it?

"Is that the solicitor I should have had during our interview?"

"No, by the sounds of it, it's the one offering to pursue your claim for compensation against the press for so shamelessly demonising you."

"Really? And this will be a solicitor of the type who chases ambulances, and offers no win no fee terms?"

"Way of the world, Mr Garatt. It may be worth following up. There are usually substantial benefits to be had, and they always settle out of court – the trick is not to be too greedy."

"I'll think about it. I take it that's not all you wanted to tell me. And, since you obviously didn't come to apologise, and I suspect you don't act out of altruism either, how can I be of assistance?"

"It's more of a warning."

"Oh?"

"The fact is, we're no longer investigating Grace Milner's disappearance."

Ah... poor Grace! "You've found her?"

"No. It's just that things have become... somewhat political. We were following certain lines of enquiry. And now we're not."

"But others are?"

"Possibly. I couldn't say."

"Because her father's politically connected? No need to answer that... they all are, aren't they? Heavens, what must it be like to be so wealthy one can have the police kick a missing person's enquiry into the long grass?"

Seacombe evades the question. "How do you know George Milner?"

"I don't. I was invited round to that appalling place of his up on Clover Lane for a chat, but the great man wasn't there. It's odd, you know? If you search online, there's no mention of him – no mention of his place up there either, but it must have caused a storm with planning permission. You'd think a man as wealthy as that would have warranted a mention or two somewhere."

"But then a man as wealthy and well connected as you suggest would surely be able to have himself deleted from public record."

"Well... he could only manage that if he actually owned the internet."

"George Milner deals in data, Mr Garatt. Big data. The internet is becoming increasingly feudal, carved up between a warring and ever diminishing number of barons who control the 'this', the 'that' and the 'other' of it. Those little boxes you tick to say you've read the terms and conditions? Well, if you actually read those terms and conditions you'd realise you were handing him, and people like him your every click. I know you know that, but perhaps what's not so widely known is how pervasive a phenomenon it is, how much it's changing the zeitgeist. They do clever things with that data, Mr Garatt. They can read your mind with it, and they can change your mind too, make you click whichever box they want you to. So what was he wanting with you, I wonder?"

"Honestly, I suspect it was just a ruse so his personal protection people could tamper with my 'phone."

Seacombe grants me, for a moment, the novelty of a wide eyed look of alarm. "You have it with you?"

"Don't be daft. No, I... I lost it... getting careless with 'phones these days. Must be my age, or my increasing levels of paranoia."

"Good man. Probably wise. Infernal things, but obviously useful in my line of work. And there's no such thing as being too paranoid when it comes to suspecting the potential duplicity of one's mobile telephone. Trust me on that."

"Preaching to the converted, Inspector. They were telling me they now think she was kidnapped for ransom."

He allows a silent laugh to betray his feelings on the kidnap theory, yet it's only recently they were questioning the boyfriend on suspicion of something or other... and if not that then what?

"And what do you think, Mr Garatt?"

"Let's forget all these paranoid theories, shall we? The presumption of violence against young women? People have other motives for the way they behave."

"Such as?"

"What if she just wanted to live an ordinary life?"

He doesn't laugh at that, which leads me to believe it's not so outrageous an idea after all. Is this the conclusion he's come to as well?

"And what if she's tried it before? Did you know she had a bunch of private security people on her tail at all times? Where were they when she disappeared? Did you question them? I humbly suggest they'd be far more intimately aware of her every move than I am."

He considers all these questions for a moment, decides not to answer any of them. "Well, that's as may be, Mr Garatt, but as I explained we no longer have any interest in the case, and that's an end to it."

Sure, everyone knows she wasn't murdered, or kidnapped, that she has indeed run away, and that she's run away before. Her family didn't even report her missing. That she was reported missing at all is more of an embarrassment than anything. So who was it did the reporting? Was it Melvyn... concerned boyfriend?

"Contact that ambulance chaser, Mr Garatt. See if you can't profit from this almighty cockup." And then, tangentially: "An ordinary life? I wouldn't rate her chances very much with that one, would you?"

"What's stopping her – I mean, other than everyone her father can pay to find her?"

"Well, why would anyone choose it, I mean when ordinariness is so precarious these days. When we were children ordinariness was the

impregnable bastion of the semi-detached home. It was Dad working in the factory forty hours a week on good money, and as much overtime as he wanted. It was Sunday roast with Aunty Dot, it was a small, second hand car for weekends and holidays by the sea, it was a cat curled up by the fireside. Nowadays, Mr Garatt, ordinariness... well... you've only to look out the window haven't you?"

"I didn't say I understood why she would do it... only that it's a possibility, given the way things were for Grace at home."

"Oh, and how were they?"

"Judging by my brief visit to Hammerton House this morning, I'd say it was like being in prison."

"For you perhaps, but her kind are used to it. I mean that level of security. And with her kind of wealth you can buy any kind of freedom you want."

"That's just it though, isn't it? You can't buy it. Not real freedom. She would have to steal it. It's curious. I know this kid, born into poverty. Then I meet this other one, born into wealth. Neither have any choice in the matter, neither can escape their circumstances. Which of them is the more easily redeemable? Which one stands the greater chance of happiness?"

He pauses, as if contemplating an answer, and I'm impressed he takes me seriously, but he chooses evasion. Or perhaps there is no answer. "Well, if you do have any information or even suspicions along the lines you've mentioned, my advice would be to..."

"I really don't know anything. I'm just making up stories as I go along."

"...keep it to yourself, is what I was going to say. Remember, I no longer have any interest in the case. And if the elusive Ms. Milner is indeed alive, then keep her at arm's length. You definitely don't want to get caught between her and her father. I wouldn't want this matter to be the ruin of you."

"Any more than it has been already?"

"You're still breathing, Mr Garatt. The people surrounding George Milner are of an avaricious nature, and dubious morality. Everyone's egotistical and stupid to a degree, but mostly it does no harm because we have limited power. To be wealthy and stupid... well... just don't let their money corrupt you. You seem like a decent man, lately on his uppers, like many more out there. Don't be tempted into anything that would be against your nature. Rebuild your life

as best you can. Go back to your bookshop, and be grateful for it."

He doesn't mean the latter in a derogatory sense, implying my life is small and pathetic, dusty as an old bookshop, that indeed there is something of value in it. I did not think he would see things that way, given the things he has most likely seen over the course of his career, but his description of ordinariness has touched me. He *does* value it. He too laments its loss.

"I mean... she's not been in touch has she?" he asks.

"I thought you were no longer interested."

"I'm not. But still, you will be careful, won't you?" and then, before I can reply we are by the van and the driver is opening the door for me. "Do take care, Mr Garatt, and be sure to speak to a solicitor."

"Em... I shall. Thank you."

"You still have my card?"

"I think so."

"Here's another. Drop me a line if you like... I suspect you've not heard the last of it."

"Thanks."

"Just remember, be careful whose side you come down on."

"Side?"

"We must all choose sides, Mr Garatt, but there's only one side that's safe. The other... well, it might prove lucrative in the short term, but then you'd be on your own."

Thus am I deposited by the old place, lawn half mown, the van always a shock of ruin now. And Seacombe, my former nemesis is offering what? Protection? Advice?

What is this? Are we a spy story now? A crime drama? Do we aspire to the ranks of Le Carre? Really I had thought this another kind of tale altogether – verbose, eccentric perhaps, and ever so pseudo-literary, the kind begun by tweedy English gentlemen musing as they gaze from the windows of old

bookshops at the mess of the street beyond.

I had thought it a swansong, a dirge for the death of the western world, some poignant romance thrown in, a little mystery and literary intrigue, and through it all, the groping towards some hitherto unrealised and unsuspected, though ever so minor personal existential revelation.

I mean,...

What's not to like about that?

So which is it to be? Do we ponder the motives, and the story of Grace Milner and her super-yachted data-baron father's gazillions? Do we shudder at his machinations, at his superlative Bond-villain credentials and his po faced henchmen? Or do we ponder more the romance, and the mystery and the meaning of this, our own ordinary life? Why do we find it so hard to settle with what we have?

Another word from our sponsors...

I finish the mow, check the safe in the garage, remove the cash from it. I don't know how long I'll be away this time.

Chapter Thirty-One

All right. Let me not spoil this. Let this be the most memorable night of my life. Except, I don't feel ready for it. There's too much else going on in the background, too many voices intruding, pulling my head in other directions. I could push the whole thing out to the next chapter, I suppose, make a cushion of space for it there instead, bounce into it from a different perspective... but I think I need to face it, this thing between me and Maggs... this unexpected thing, a thing I definitely have not pursued nor dreamed of, and yet which leaves me dry-mouthed and tingling at the mere thought of it.

Shall I present-tense it then? Or do I slide it forward into memory? Both I think. First, steady the ship, then steer her into calmer waters.

So... here we go.

It's still a month colder in the Dales than it is at home, though not as cold as when we left here just a few weeks ago. The snow has gone, but the hawthorns stand bare and wintry-black, still clawing against a bitter sky. The spring is arrested, still-born into a period of perpetual bleakness and rain.

I have warmed the entire cabin by an excess of timber in the burner and it should see us through now until morning. Maggs lies prone upon a stormy sea of bedsheets, sleeping. I have slid a duvet over the great alabaster swell of her luxuriant derriere, and now I sit here, reading, watching. It did not seem gentlemanly to leave her exposed to my conscious eye, or yours, while she slept, though I am by now familiar enough with every classically proportioned inch of her, and she with me.

No, I am not classically proportioned.

But she did not seem to mind any of that, seemed at times indeed – heavens – quite excited! There is something unreal about this of course, as I recall is always the way with sex, and always the post-coital need to confirm its reality... by doing it again.

And again.

I want to be here when she wakes, then I'll make coffee.

Her final climax was accompanied by the *petit mort,* a phenomenon I've only read about in the erotic, and also the more clinical literature, but am far from familiar with in practice, and it has worried me a

little, that she is not exactly sleeping now, more rendered unconscious, stunned by the deep-throated ferocity of that final orgasm.

I hasten to add this was not my doing, not exactly, or rather it was nothing to do with my skills, which are, I'm sure, quite pedestrian. It was more the degree to which she was prepared to abandon herself to the moment. Indeed it's fair to say that since my arrival here a few hours ago, Maggs has simply and rather uncharacteristically, opened herself wide and swallowed me whole. Whatever I have achieved with her, I have the feeling it is precisely what she would have had me achieve. No more, no less.

In her own metaphorical language then, we have broken many pots now. Indeed, we have held them high and smashed them down with gusto, and I trust this last resounding crash will be sufficient to usher in the step change her life so clearly needs, that we have transgressed enough the boundaries that contain her.

Transgressed... against what?

Well, I suppose it's against the illusion of conventionality, the convention which states that a woman who has made her bed must then lie in it – a somewhat perverse notion that comes from the golden olden times, times that never existed. And there are no conventions now, never were, really. We alone, each of us, decide what is moral, what is right, and I suspect we are perfectly capable of doing so, given sufficient space and a free run at it. All we lack is the dignity and the opportunity to reap the benefits of such native wisdom. And then of course, having taken the ride this far into a raw modernity, we discover we have not the bus fare to take us home again. Our pockets have been emptied by the likes of George Milner and his demonic sleight of hand.

What?

Stay focused, Mike. Remember, this is Maggs lying here, stunned and naked under the duck-down. And the experience of her was electrifying to your dulled senses. It is no time to be proselytising, drifting off, imagining embarking on your own personal Jarrow March, sticking it to the likes of Milord Milner.

What happened here? Tell it to the page, now. And slowly,.. mindfully!

All right.

The scarf is draped loosely around her neck still, though it had begun around her eyes, precursor to my undressing her, I told her – she standing there, stock still, feet together upon the rug. And she had thrilled to that for a while, to the game of it, to the semi sado-masochistic foreplay, *a la Spankbuster,* and me too of course.

Many things come back to me – trivial things like the quality of her clothing as I loosened it, the texture of the fabric under my fingertips as I worked zips and clasps. I am my own snob in this, I know, but it reminded me of her substance and had me very much in awe of the moment as I peeled my way back to her underwear, to the ubiquitous bra and pants – again quality, flesh toned, and silken to my fingertips, lace trimmed and a little teasy.

But when she was finally, and fully revealed in all her heat and soft fleshiness, and me on my knees, in clean white shirt and trousers, as Laura had taught me in the ancient days of the big haired, shoulder padded eighties, and me wondering what the hell I should do next – some stern command or other, perhaps? I lost my nerve and sank myself instead into the warm pillow of her belly, wrapped my arms around her in a mood that was less charged with eroticism, and more in search of the gentler comforts of a Sandra.

She felt it too, I think, felt it with a little gasp of surprise, removed the scarf then from around her eyes with one hand, laid the other on my shoulder, looked down at me. "All right," she said, tenderly. "I didn't think we'd get this far."

Her turn to move, I thought, and pray God guide me through.

"Stand up then, and undress for me."

"Em... I'm not much to look at Maggs."

"Is that the real reason for this blindfold? Then I can't see your grey under-hairs, your superman underpants, and your skinny little legs?"

Was it? I don't know. Possibly. She has a challenging way with words, inviting always a spirited come-back. *What do you mean Superman underpants?* Certainly, looking at her in those first minutes of foreplay, I felt I had gained by far the greater end of the arrangement than she ever would. She was alarmingly nude, generous in the hips of course, and the thighs, full breasted, and the voice... the voice deepening with arousal to a husky, breathy confidence.

"It's not so much the rest of you that concerns me," she said.

As I worked nervously at the buttons of my shirt, she moved in to open the trousers, yanked the belt out with one deft sweep, doubled it up and slapped it across the palm of her hand, a hand hot and tactile, then slipping in...

Woah!

For a woman who had spent twenty years making love to the same man, she was both confident and alarmingly direct in her handling of things, so to speak. I should have expected no less.

"This is what I want," she said.

I was in thrall to the touch, of course, to the grip, wanting to expand myself into it for ever. Maggs' grip! Hell... all those times in the bookshop and she sitting primly across from me, pinching out the creases in her trousers while reading... and she was thinking... this.

"So, can I have it?"

"Em... what?"

She gives me an impatient tug. "This, Mike. I want this. Right now."

She turned, bent forward, leaning her elbows lightly, nonchalantly upon the back of a chair, her forearms draped with a dancers poise, the curve of them terminated in the relaxed droop of pink-pointed fingernails, and she gave a terse, unambiguous, shake of her bottom.

The memory of her hands on me that first occasion is still sufficiently vivid to ready me for her at once, to say nothing of the cool wet aching slide of that first glorious abutment, so to speak. I remember then I gathered her hair into my fist, its smooth golden weight like a rein, then lifted her gently to the bit, and we rode home in great bounding strides.

If only I could be persuaded she still wants me, that she will ever want me like that again!

"What are you reading?" she asks.

"Oh... you're awake. Precious Bane, Mary Webb. Thank heavens! I thought you'd died. Coffee?"

She thinks for a moment. "Precis it for me. One sentence."

"What?"

"The book, the story."

"Oh, em... money bad, love good. Funny how we all know that, right from the start, but we always manage to screw it up anyway. So, coffee?"

"Not yet. God's sake Mike, get into bed with me."

"Really?"

"Yes, *really*."

"Okay... I just... didn't want to presume..."

She sighs, a playful exasperation: "The time to be not making presumptions is when we're both dressed and with our masks on. When we're undressed, and we've just made love with as much... enthusiasm as that... I don't know about you, but I expect the time to be… something else entirely."

I think to say I'll remember that for next time, but hesitate, not wanting to presume, again – I mean – that there will ever be a next time, that she has well and truly broken the marriage pots now, punctured the airless balloon of it, and there is no need, after tonight, to break them ever again.

I hear the sound of rain, the crackle of burning wood, see myself in the third person now, a man lying at his ease, his arm draped loosely over a woman's waist, his cheek nestled to the sticky pillow of her bosom, cool at first press but heating quickly and becoming moist. She's turned half into him, hand upon his back, fingertips strumming slowly – and the heat of her body lights him from within, so that for the time of their closeness the world is suspended and the reality beyond their place of shelter is the same nothingness, be it now or ten thousand years ago. To forget everything but this... this is the very thing. True riches is to simply to be in close relationship with another... and to know, and to be willing... to surrender.

Everything.

We all know this.

But I cannot do it. I cannot tell her I love her, because it might no longer be

true, because a man is apt to get confused about these things, but also because I do not want to distract her from her mission, which is to save her skin and her soul.

"You came." She tells me this with a tone of absolute certainty, as if to remind herself of a thing she had begun to doubt.

"Well, I could hardly have arranged to meet you all the way out here, and then not turn up, could I? Of course I came."

"No, I mean... you came. You definitely *came*."

"Em... yes?" I hesitate to assume her meaning now.

"Several times," she confirms.

Oh, *that*. "Ah, well..."

'Several' is pushing it a bit, but twice certainly... possibly three, but it seems crude, to say nothing of boastful to record such things here. *Old Mike Garatt gets it away 'several' times in the space of an hour. What a stud!*

It was a revelation anyway, and impossible not to... come or cum... almost impossible in fact not to come sooner than would have been decent, sooner than she might have wanted, actually, thus making it merely huffy puffy, as she once so admirably put it, me laid back upon the post-coital pillow, and she lying in a pool of cold, wet disappointment.

"Em... yes. Indeed."

"Martin never could," she tells me. "He used to finish himself off, like he was... I don't know... urinating on me or something. It was very unpleasant. I think he meant it that way, meant it to be degrading. At least that's how I saw it, and I was afraid of hurting his feelings by telling him so. But some men are like that, I suppose. They use sex as a weapon to subdue, to dominate, don't they."

"Sadly... yes."

It's tempting to add another feature to the already gross caricature I'm sketching of the mysterious man-child Martin, but I resist the temptation. We should not be talking about this anyway. Why? Do Maggs and I know and trust each other well enough to be sharing such intimate confidences already,

and not use them against each other at some future time? Or is it more that a man likes to maintain the delusion he is always the first to know a woman in this way? Still, it's clearly another source of pain for Maggs, that she has been a long time humiliated and in more ways than one.

It's strange then, how she can have settled on the wrong side of an abusive relationship, when to me she seems so strong and confident. And stranger still that if she so resents the domination, as well she might, then why would she have wanted to play that game with me? Have me spank her, for heaven's sake? Surely, she would have preferred at least a metaphorical revenge on all men by having me on my knees and licking the soles of her shoes?

So much I don't understand!

"I'm... sorry Maggs."

"Just pillow talk, Mike. Ignore it."

"Hard to ignore... harder to know what I can do..."

"You've already done it. You've been doing it since the day we met, you muffin. Now just lie with me like this, will you? 'till morning?"

"Of course. Gladly."

No arguments there. Lying with her, lying in her heat, there comes a feeling of transcendence, of escape into sweet oblivion. But escape from what? Oppression, I suppose, the oppression of pointlessness, of existential nothingness and stolen dreams. To slip away like this, wrapped in bliss...

And never to wake up.

Wait! What did she mean, since the day we met?

Don't go there, Mike. Too dangerous.

We embrace oblivion in various ways, don't we? There's alcohol of course – nothing finer than the oblivion at the bottom of a whisky bottle, at least for an hour or so, or until the passing out. I know I told Maggs I don't drink, and it's true, I don't – not any more. Then there are the drugs, and the sex, the former I am not familiar with at all, the latter, only a little. But all of them addictive and damaging if taken in the wrong spirit.

And then there is love.

As I sink into sleep it is with the feeling I am definitely in love with Maggs, that I would cling to her for ever for the transcendence and for the freedom she might grant me. Freedom from what though? From my lonesome self? Is that all? But this is not the path of a happy ending. I know what's on her mind right now; she'll be leaving soon, and as usual when she leaves it'll be with no firm arrangement we shall ever meet again.

We are out by the river now. We have carried our coffee across the wet meadow and down to the rocks. So here we are, well wrapped, wreathed in our own breaths, a sleepy early morning mist rising from the more sluggish waters by the banks of the Wharfe.

"I don't want an affair Mike, you see?"

I know that. I know last night wasn't about embarking upon one, that it was just to break things, as she puts it, but still,... it does not stop me from wanting this woman to want to be with me, for ever, as we were last night. Intimate and closed. As one.

"Well, of course not. I understand perfectly. You've explained this to me before."

"It was just to break things. You know?"

"Absolutely. Yes... and did we, you think? Break them? I mean sufficiently?"

"Ooh yes. I feel... very different this morning. Thank you."

She is not the only one who feels differently this morning, but she must not sense the change in me, that I have gone from desolation to starry eyed lover in the space of one night. She would only lecture me on the stupidity of it.

"What will you do?" I ask.

"I'm going to rent for a little while. There's a small flat over the shop in Clitheroe. Not much, but I think Chris will let me have it cheap, until I can get back into my mother's house. I don't want to be one of those slum landlords. I want to give the tenant fair notice. A year maybe. Better for me that way too. I don't want Martin to know where I'm living you see?"

"Does Chris know? I mean... about your situation."

A brief shake of the head. Maggs is very close with her confidences. I should

be flattered. "No need for him to know, Mike."

"What will you tell Martin?"

"Nothing. Why should I? I'll just sneak out when he's away. Is that cowardly, do you think?"

"I don't know about cowardly. This is a man who hits you, after all. It sounds a lot safer just to do what you're doing."

"But you do see, don't you? I don't want there to be any suspicion of my being involved with someone else... it would... complicate things."

"I know. It would be easier for him to prove you were having an affair, even it it wasn't true, than for you to prove he was cruel, even though that is true."

"Exactly. So I can't move into that sweet little caravan with you. Even though I know you only meant it as a kindness."

"But... I hope I can still help out if you need me. I mean, with anything Maggs. Anything at all."

I don't know what I'm promising of course, and neither does she, but she grants me a nod, allows me onside, so to speak, though perhaps only to deflect the direction of our conversation, and then she laughs. "We certainly broke some pots last night though, didn't we? Where did you learn all that stuff?"

"Oh... you know... I hope it was all right. I mean... it sounded like you wanted the whole spankbuster playbook, and that frightened me to death. I really wouldn't know where to start with any of that. I'm not naturally assertive, as you're so often fond of reminding me. We'd... have to know each other a lot better for that to be a safe game to play."

"Well, let's just say what you came up with proved to be a suitable alternative. And thank you. Was it from a book or something? Anais Nin, perhaps? Or Pauline Réage?"

"No, nothing like that. Everything I know of the carnal arts came from The Joy of Sex, actually."

"Really? I've never read that one."

"Surely everyone our age has read has read The Joy of Sex, Maggs? Alex

Comfort. '72. An absolute classic. Taught me everything I know. Seriously."

"I thought it was Laura and Sandra who taught you everything you know." She laughs, grants me the blushing intimacy of her dimples. "Anyway, I'll look it up," she says.

Oh, Lord, I hope we can at least remain friends. Just... don't disappear on me Maggs, or I shall die!

She sobers then, as if she's read my mind, or decrypted it from the morse-code flicker of my eyes. "I'm sorry, Mike."

"Don't be."

I could tell her she's wonderful, that it was the most memorable night of my life, that making love with Maggs, and just, lying with her, was the most life-affirming thing I've ever known... and I do mean that… but I am hamstrung by not wanting to make this any more difficult for her than it already is.

So...

"When will you leave?" I ask.

"Buy me lunch," she says. "Then let me go."

All right, lunch it is.

Chapter Thirty-Two

It's been several weeks now and no word from her since we parted in the Dales, and today is my last day in the caravan, out by the marsh. The new van is in place and ready to move into. I saw it yesterday, gave the final inspection-man the nod. I have the keys in my pocket, a new abode nestling in the ghost-ruins of the old. It was looking inappropriately stylish and well polished, its pastel greens a curious match for the profusion of Bamboo, and the garden greening all round for spring, weeds thickening already in the borders.

I have security lights and cameras now. They record to a computer that runs continuously and saves its little tell tales to the cloud. I have added a sign at the approach which warns of 24 hour CCTV and which is probably the greater deterrent. All of this was surprisingly inexpensive and easy to set up. It's hardly the same level of paranoia I observed at Hammerton House, seat of Milord Milner – at least when he deigns to visit the UK – but I worry I shall feel similarly oppressed by it, that in order to live at all, like most of us now, I will live in a prison of my own construction, while under the illusion I am securing my freedom.

Lesley has been strange, avoiding eye contact, answering all attempts at conversation with single word answers, and nothing by way of her usual quirky home-spun wisdom coming back at me. I had thought she was missing Maggs, as I am missing her, but I've realised the truth is much simpler and I'm a fool for not realising it sooner.

She's been gone for much of the day. I'd thought to give her space to regain her sense of humour, and I find her now, as expected, safe and sound, out on the green, by the sea. The sky is turning golden as the sun slips below the yard arm. I bought her some watercolours and a pad, and some water-brushes on that last trip back from the Dales.

She is painting the Plover Scar Light.

"Fuckin' colours are crap," she says, her humour obviously still lacking.

The colours are not 'crap'. There is merely an excess of them and the paper has become swollen from too much water. Still, there is something eerily insightful in her capture of the scene – unsettling in fact, but that could simply be her mood. And mine.

"Watercolours aren't an easy medium to master," I tell her, as if I would

know. "For a first attempt I'd say that's impressive. Seen a lot worse by people calling themselves artists."

"Still crap."

"No. Be kinder to yourself, Lesley. You're doing okay."

"Kinder?"

"Easy on yourself. You know what I mean?"

"Yea, right. If was doing that I'd be stayin' here. Really like it here, Mike."

"It is a pretty spot for sure."

"Never seen the sea before."

"Really?"

"Love how you can smell it, and the sounds of the birds and everythin's just so fresh and awesome. Can't we stay a bit longer?"

"The new van's ready now. Our lease here's up tomorrow. We have to go back. We could come again though if you like. Any time. It's not far to drive. We could bring a picnic."

"Picnic sounds a bit weird though."

"Oh?"

"Not like I'm your girlfriend is it?"

"Does it matter?"

"No... it's just, I suppose... we both know what's waitin' for me back at Middleton, that's all."

"Waiting for you?"

"Fuckin' street, innit?"

"You have a room at the new van. You know that. I told you. You weren't really thinking of going back to the street were you?"

"Got to get some money, somehow. Can't keep spongin' off you. Can't even pay for me own stuff for when I'm on the blob. And no deodorant or nothin'. I must really stink. I mean, do I stink, Mike?"

"No, you don't smell. But... on the blob? Oh... is that?.. any time soon?"

"No. I'm snappy 'cos of somethin' else."

"All right, but look. You've accepted help from others before. Why am I different?"

"It's just not right, me not givin' anything back."

"We've already talked about this."

"It's not right, Mike. I mean what's innit for you?"

"Nothing. But that's the point. Don't you see? We're corrupted into thinking even our relationships have to be a series of transactions, or trades... you give me this, I'll give you that. But human beings aren't really like that. Not deep down."

"The ones I know are."

"Then you've been unfortunate."

"You're not like... religious are you?"

"No, what makes you say that?"

"Dunno. But religious people are the fuckin' worst."

"I'm not sure that's true... maybe in some cases. But no, I'm not religious."

"First man to stick his hands up me skirt was a vicar. Can't get more religious than that, can you? I suppose he thought it didn't count 'cos I was a just kid, and heathen, like..."

"Em..."

"Don't suppose God'll let him burn in hell for it either. But what about me?"

"Oh... Lesley..."

"Sorry to shock you, Mike. It's no big deal. Appens all the time."

"No... no, it doesn't. I mean... it shouldn't."

I'm a while coming round from that one, face in my hands, cringing at the thought of it, and wanting to smash the vicar's face in. But I discover the best way of coming round from it is to do what she's been doing all her life. Taking a breath, and moving on.

Okay, so... in her world there must be something I want, because although the altruism of which I speak is a deep part of human nature, the tortured part of ourselves denies its existence. Perhaps then she will settle for the pretence of something.

"All right, listen," I tell her. "Maybe it's because I love you."

"What? No you don't. That's just weird. Don't go all creepy on me."

"I don't mean like *that*. I mean like... maybe I want to be your dad, or something. And if that doesn't work for you, then all right... let's say it's because I'm thinking if I'm nice to you, Maggs will be nice to me."

She blushes, smirks, and I should read it as an opening back into friendship, but find myself instead irritated by it. "What part of that do you find funny?"

"Oh... shut up. Don't mean nothin'. Don't be me dad though. Please don't be me dad."

"Okay. Uncle then..."

"That's worse. Jeeze. 'Uncle Mike.' Noooo!"

"Look... I don't care what you call it. We've got to break out of what's conventional here or we're all going under. We need to be a bit radical, okay? The futures no longer about growing into the rest of your life, is it? I mean, not the way we used to do it – marriage, kids, nice little house, work until you retire gracefully, leave a bit of money for your kids when you go. All that's gone. It's just about surviving now, and for the foreseeable. You should know that better than anyone."

She looks chastened, and I'm sorry for that, but it's too late, and anyway I don't want to take it back because it sounds like the truest thing I've said so far: *the future is no longer about growing into.*

It's about surviving.

But what for?

What the Hell's the point of that?

"Sorry, Mike. Okay. You be nice to me, and I'll tell Maggs how nice you are and then she'll fall in love with you. And maybe, if that works out... then maybe I can let you be me dad. But not me uncle. Right?"

"Okay."

That's settled then. Except I probably couldn't handle it – Maggs in love with me, I mean. A night abed is hardly the same thing as living with each other day in day out, and making it work....

Is it?

Lesley's hand is on my arm now, squeezing, coaxing – ragged nails, flaking black varnish. "Mates then, eh?"

"Sure." I give her a nod, return to the subject of the van. "It's more than just a room, don't you see? It's an address as well."

"So?"

"So you can use it to apply for stuff. Do you have a birth certificate, national insurance number?"

"Lost all that ages ago. Got nothin'. You know that. Can't even sign me name on no forms. And can't read or write, so what kind of job do you think I'm going to get, even if there were any for the likes of me. And even if I started learnin' to read and write now I'd 'appen be like just about infant grade by the time I'm your age. And what's the fuckin' point in that?"

"You're thinking too far ahead. I didn't say things were going to be easy, but maybe just a bit easier than they have been up to now. We could get you sorted, some ID, an address, a bank account, some social security payments, put your name down for a council flat – I presume they still exist. It'll take ages, years probably, I know, and we'll get knocked back, but... we have to try. God's sakes Lesley, we have to try."

"No, Mike. There's nothin'. It's all gone."

"I understand, you're scared."

"Scared?"

"Well, you know? Belonging... of being back in the world."

"Oh? And like you're not?"

"Well, I suppose..."

She flares, snatches back her hand: "Oh... just... just leave me alone, will you?"

"Lesley..."

"No. You're just pretendin' to be a nice guy. If I was some scabby old bloke with no teef, smelling of wee, you wouldn't have taken me in wouldn't you, neither of you? You wouldn't have bought me new boots and p,... painting stuff. You wouldn't be sayin' how you loved me and wanted to be me dad. You'd just have tossed me a few coppers and walked on by, left me to freeze me tits off like all the rest. It's just... just fuckin' weird Mike. You and Maggs, and me. Fuckin' weird is what it is."

She has a point, and we've touched on the nice-guy fallacy before. Yes, it makes a difference she's young, also sweet looking when she's washed, and that she has a cute vulnerability about her. That ugly old bloke? She's right, I would have left him to die. After all who needs him? And what kind of a jerk does that make me? And that thing about belonging... or rather the fear of it. It bounces back at me, hard... some home truths there too, Mike. You're afraid as well. You're hiding out. You're as homeless as she is. Always have been. As for the three of you being weird? Well, okay. No arguments there.

But who cares?

Do not go gently.

She reads the hurt in my silence, gives a sigh. "Sorry. Don't know what's up with me, these days."

"No, you're right. You've been disappointed, I mean... in the past."

"Disappointed's not the word. I've been fucked over, an over. And I mean *really*. This is probably the worst time of your life, all this upset

and all, but being around you and Maggs has been the best for me. You're not weird. Didn't mean that, not really. You're different, that's all, and the only way out for me is to trust... but it's knowing who. Right? And I'm dead scared of it all going wrong again."

"Okay... look I was thinking, when we move back in... I could always..."

"What?"

"Invite Alan round for tea and biscuits... or something..."

"Don't you dare."

"Oh?"

She's shaking her head, growling at me now but smiling at the same time and then: "Maggs hasn't been around lately."

"No."

"Did it not work out then? Been afraid of askin' cos it didn't seem my business, but since you're poking your nose into my love life of a sudden, seems the least I can do is take an interest in yours."

"It worked out... just fine..."

"Then where is she? Why'd she not come back with you? It's been weeks."

"Maggs just needs some space right now while she sorts her life out. Then, maybe... I don't know..."

"But she *is* leavin' him, right?"

"Says so."

"And then what? You two be hookin' up, like?"

"Oh... I don't know. I'm sure she's not thought that far. But leaving him's a start, wouldn't you say?"

"Don't you want to be with her?"

I'm about to deny it, tell her it's not like that between us, tell her Maggs has enough problems at the moment without tangling herself up in another

relationship. But the time for fooling myself and others is over, and Lesley's openness is deserving of an equal candour.

"Yes... yes, actually. I do. I really miss her."

"So?"

"So... I suppose I'm just afraid of admitting it. First of all to myself, but most of all to her."

Buy me lunch and let me go.

Is this punishment again for past sins? To fall for a woman at my age, a woman I cannot have? But for any of that to be true I would have to first of all believe in *something*, some benign guiding principle, to the universe, even *God* for god's sake, when all I see about me is this *vile scramble for loot.*

Ah,... Joseph Conrad, Heart of Darkness. (1899)

Thanks Alan.

And the impoverishment in its wake, we the detritus in the river's filthy wash... where am I now? Sounds like a dip into Ballardian dystopia. "Day of Creation", perhaps? (1987)

I'm even expressing myself in cryptoamnesiac quotations now, retreated fully into books, into a world of ideas and metaphor, hiding in my van all these years. Dammit, I could have done something else, found other work. Not all the guys from the foundry ended up on the scrapper, and many of them were older than me. I had contacts all over the place, hundreds of them. It would only have taken a little effort, Mike.

Oh... you and your spreadsheet of death! Lesley's better off on the street than disappearing from life altogether into a thin tin box with the likes of you. Maybe her being with you like this is even more disgusting than an old man pawing at her. Vicar and all. Think about it! Aren't you debasing her in other ways, deeper, more subtle.

Ughh!

"Mike?" She's taken hold of my sleeve again, is tugging me back into focus.

"Hmm?"

"She likes you. I told you."

"Yes."

"She loves you."

"No... you just want her to."

She thinks for a moment, realises it's true. "Okay. But it's all there is that's worth anything. Innit? Love, I mean. And it's a pity we can't love more people than we do 'cos them we don't love, we're taught to treat like shit."

Ker-Ping!

Yes, a worthy revelation from the mouth of one perhaps not so innocent, but the *Ker-ping* is also an intrusive notification from my phone. Mail from Maggs perhaps? Expressing her love, or perhaps just wishing me well for tomorrow?

Going home to the new van, remember?

I take a brief peek at the phone, then slide it back into my pocket. It's just junk from a random email: Pythea40781 at Freemail, and now I'm wondering how the hell we're so easily compromised, sucked into this giant mill of targeted ad-marketing junk. Junk, like the inside of our brains are becoming. I'd been so careful with this phone. Is the damned thing listening to me? Assume it is, Mike.

"Don't think it's crap then?"

"Eh?"

"The colours?"

"Oh... no, no. Not at all. We'll frame it, hang it in your room, at the van?"

She thinks for a moment, considers it, wrinkles her nose in rejection. "Nah," she says. "But thanks anyway."

"Look, you're right. I'm glad you're not a scabby, toothless old man, because then there'd be two of us."

"You're not scabby, or toothless."

"Gutless then."

"That's you and me both."

"You're not gutless, Lesley. In other times you'd be a warrior. You'd lead others into battle because... because you're fearless."

"You don't half talk bollocks sometimes." She laughs, gathers her stuff, gives me a sad sort of smile. "All right," she says. "Lets get back. It's fuckin' freezin' out here."

"Okay. And Lesley?"

"Hmm?"

"Do you have to swear so much? I mean... *all* the time?"

"No," she says. "Not *all* the time. Come on then. Need to get you where it's warm. Got to be careful of rheumatics, at your age."

She sets off at a brisk pace. I hang back, watching her go, enjoying the last of the light and the sea, and the return of her sparkiness. She's right, it'll be a shame to leave this place.

Then it dawns on me – the notification – I know who Pythea is, actually. It's not junk at all. I catch my breath, snatch up the phone again.

It's Grace.

Write this down, she says. And then delete.

But... it's just a bunch of numbers, and makes no sense.

Write it down!

Delete.

Chapter Thirty-Three

I don't know how much strangeness you're wanting, or how much you can take. It's a genre thing, I suppose. You come in expecting one thing, like this dusty old geezer sitting in a second hand bookshop, pontificating on how things were so much better in the old days, then here he is showing you another thing entirely.

We've already had the spy story, the mystery police thing, the love story, a bit of crime thriller – I mean if Milord Milner isn't a crook, then who is? We've even had a little bit of bonk-buster, though I admit I glossed over much of the animal fervour of that in favour of the romantic angle, out of respect for Maggs' privacy – and it just seemed like the decent thing to do.

But this is something else entirely and you're most likely going to find it really, really weird. It's something you might think is even verging on the speculative, or a bit science fiction-ish, but it isn't. Trust me, it's already obsolete, technologically quaint.

Most of us don't want strangeness do we? We want our days predictable, punctuated by three square meals. We want a thirty minute commute, and a nine to five, then a couple of hours after tea collapsed in front of a predictable Soap while we shovel crisps into our mouths and wash them down with cheap wine from the corner shop.

Then bed and dreams.

Dreams we can do. Dreams are okay, I mean for all their strangeness – and it's mainly because we forget them so quickly. But that's about the size of it, isn't it? Any real strangeness in our waking lives and we're covering our ears going: Nah,nah,nah,nah,...

But strangeness is everywhere. Every story ever written came out of someone's head. Did you ever pause to think about that? Isn't it weird? We make stuff up, make believe it's real, and it's okay: people still want to know what happens to these other people, people like me, who aren't actually real.

But not all strangeness is made up.

I was reading the left-leaning news this afternoon and it was telling me of a town in America, all the jobs moved out and those nine to five people with their family SUVs and their cute little clapboard houses now living in tents

along a bleak riverside, on the outskirts of town and going hungry. No more wine and crisps for them. This is their new normal – discarded, like waste, scrunched up and tossed into the bushes, their own Milord Milners caring little if they live or die. But these are not empty beer-cans. They are people, indeed more than people, they are, in the philosophical, and even in the existential sense, just different versions of you and me.

It will kill us, you know, this thing we have created. And only those of us capable of sustaining our Milord Milners will be allowed to survive, albeit barely. In this respect then, we will be farmed like cows. Some for milk, some for slaughter.

How the Milord Milners are made these days is open to speculation. They are no longer born to it like they were in olden times. I suspect rather they are merely psychopaths, that the system favours their emotionally insensitive natures, and the rest of us are just too passive or too stupid to prevent them gaining power. Shall we merely go on allowing it? How can we? How can we not? I mean, if we are to survive.

But what is surviving? It's a subject that needs redefining. And while we're at it, what is living? I mean truly living.

Ditto.

You can forget the notion now that through diligence, the dream of middle class semi-detached suburbia, and 2.1 children will ever be yours. And the working class too, you can forget the notion of meaningful work and ample playtime for afters. You already know this. You're both in the same boat now, your bright young ones with degrees in this and that, rubbing shoulders with bright young ones who don't, and all chasing nothing-Mcjobs in the murky, shark infested pool of the precariat, all of you filling in here and there on poverty wages until you're automated out of existence. You own no capital, you have no provision for old age. Do you think you can still run around a warehouse when you're eighty five with cataracts, arthritic hips and a dodgy prostate?

So what am I saying here?

Beyond stating the problem, I don't know. It depends what you want, what you value, or can re-evaluate in your life. Whether we go on pursuing the thrill of those dubious stimulations promised by Milord Milner's ultimately empty mouse-clicks, or we set our devices aside, and do something else, something that does not involve staring at a screen and adding to the sedimentary layers of data for others to mine and profit by.

I have a feeling the answer lies in rediscovering that truer sense of the ordinariness of the world, the purer treasure of it, and yes, the sheer grace of it. Only there can we recapture our souls, and live as we should. And be happy.

I don't know what I mean by any of this exactly, only that in common with the rest of us, I'm working on it...

Do not go gently
Anyway...

It's a few days before I catch up with myself, so to speak, settle back into the old van, a place that is now neither old nor empty. It seems wider, brighter... and smelling sweetly of oiled wood. It's fully fitted of course, so there's no furniture to buy, just some pots and pans and knives and forks. I also buy a hideously large TV for the living room, and a smaller one for Lesley to use in her bedroom. I shall stream old movies on mine. I have the Misfits lined up for this evening, and shall make believe my love is all for Marilyn, like the sad sack that I am. Then I shall retire tearful like I always do, as if in lament for something lost that never truly was.

The WiFi router is newer and seems faster, so I have junked my old laptop, bought another to take advantage of the extra bandwidth. Thus am I (partially) born again. So much for setting aside all my devices, but I promise you I am determined to discover a way of using them more skilfully.

All my books have gone of course, incinerated, and the shelves seem bare. I shall have to do something about that, and soon. Begin a fresh collection, something to take away the deadness and the hollow sounding air.

But all told I've a feeling now I'll be all right here. Lesley's presence lends to things a different vibe and I feel protected by it, more-so than by the cameras and the security lights, which are proving over-sensitive, flashing on even at the passing of a hedgehog. Lesley and I have argued on a number of occasions now, a rumbling on of those first sparky spats by the Plover Scar Light, but neither of us have drawn blood. I think we are gauging out one another's safe zones – not that we might one day transgress them, more in order to guarantee we never do.

What was it she said?

No... not Lesley... Grace!

Write this down and then delete.

Okay, I'm staring at it now, as I have done for weeks, off and on, wondering if I wrote it down properly before deleting:

17/08/06
22/03/05
48/02/02
56/02/01
27/05/10
110/02/02

A code perhaps?

Well... yes, I suppose it could be, but does this mean we are a spy story again? Are we Enid Blyton? Are we Conan Doyle? Or am I thinking too deeply about things. Is Grace, for all of that beauty and grace, simply mad? Is Godward's painting of Pythea a worthy piece of art, or did he and all those other highbrow Victorian gentlemen simply enjoy staring at naked girls?

You know what I mean?

Is it all mere artifice?

I digress again.

It's a book code, perhaps?

Page/Line/Word.

You never did that stuff at school?

Which book though?

Dylan's "Miscellany", of course. What else? I take up my well thumbed copy and try it out:

So,...

The first word is on page seventeen, eighth line down, sixth place, counting from the left hand margin. And the word is: "seek".

Okay, next word, page twenty two,.. and so on,... and what do we have?

'me'

So,... "Seek me." This is promising. And the next bits are:

"out" and "in"

"Seek me out in"

I'm unable to suppress a mounting excitement as the words begin to make sense... seek me out in... where? Where must I seek her out?

"be free".

What? No, that can't be right. "seek me out in be free" ?

Am I missing something here? Try it again:

"seek me out in be free."

That makes no sense at all. I must have made a mistake copying it down.

Too late now.

Damn.

The weather settles in wet.

We use the time to work out how to apply for Lesley's birth certificate, how to recover her national insurance number, and the proofs of identity that are needed. I help her with the forms and we send them off, slowly piece back together the threads of her documented self. There will be an interview with someone at the Department for Work and Pensions, maybe other interviews with agencies I have never heard of. Identity is important in these post-BREXIT days, especially the root of one's Englishness. The prospect terrifies her, so she cannot sleep.

I tell her I will go with her to her interviews, sit with her.

She cannot articulate her fear beyond imagining she will be deported, that the "immigration enforcement" vans we see so many of these days will come to drag her away, a butch wench in paramilitary fatigues, with a face like a bag of spanners, pulling her by the hair, that she will be strip searched by lewd and aggressive guards with shouty voices in some bland for-profit-prison, that

she will be punished for her failure to be ordinary, and so on... and so on. And for the first time, through her fears, I have the real sense of the damage she is carrying, and the extent of it, that although kindness may help her heal a little, she will always need looking after.

"You can't be deported from your own country, Lesley. I mean... where would they send you?"

"I dunno. Shove me in the sea? Like they'd fuckin' care... problem solved. And who would miss me?"

"I would miss you. Maggs would miss you. Alan would miss you. Alan would jump into the sea and rescue you. We are your country."

She blushes at that, allows me a smile. "Shut up... you idiot."

Seek.me.out.in.be.free

Be.Free?

Come on Mike, think! You should know it. It sounds familiar.

I invite Alan for tea. Think of an excuse whereby I shall have to nip out for a while, thus leaving him and Lesley alone to chat, or whatever else they fancy getting up to, though I suspect Alan is old fashioned in that respect, and I trust Lesley can respect that in him. Perhaps it will at least cheer her up, the power of a little romance. I am an unlikely cupid of course, but I am not immune to the emotional power of seeing love blossom in the hearts of others.

Lesley does not want me to do it – leave them alone, I mean. But tea and biscuits are fine, she says, even takes herself off on a tour of the thrift shops with a loaned tenner for a dress in order, she says, to look more like a girl for him. She returns from her expedition empty handed, and tearful, gives me the tenner back.

I feel for her, but am of little use in dressing girls. We need Maggs for that. She would do an exemplary job, pull out the best labels from the dross, have them washed and ironed, have Lesley looking – dare I say – respectable, in no time. But Maggs is nowhere. She is not at the shop – Lesley has checked, has quizzed the staff. But they are all mostly new faces brought in to plug the gaps we left behind. I think of the shelves in disarray now. Only Alan remains of the old itinerant crew, and I imagine him stuttering in frustration at the outrage as his Conrad is stuffed in next to Wesley.

I don't suppose I'll ever work there again. It's a salutary lesson, metaphor of life and all that, that we do what we can while we can do it, but one is ever missed for very long.

And life goes on...

"You could call her, Mike."

"Who?"

"Maggs, you dummy."

"I can't. She said I had to let her go. You call her."

"She said that? Oh, Mike!... But I can't neither. You know I can't."

"Why not? You just follow the numbers like I showed you. We did it before, when we practised. Remember?"

"No, I mean I'd be scared to."

"Scared? Why?"

"In case she answered and I wouldn't know what to say."

"Well, I'd be scared as well, and for the same reason."

Therefore, we are agreed: *we cannot ring Maggs.*

Between the rains I work on the garden, untangling the borders from their winter sleep. Lesley joins me, wants to know the difference between what growths are considered weeds and what are not. She becomes a dab hand with a hoe and a fork, sinks her angry energy into the soil. I am beginning to realise I enjoy her company and, conversely, am beginning dislike my own as I grow to discern more the incompleteness that has always dogged my days, and which Lesley, at least for now, partially fills.

Cars cruise by as we work. I prick my ears at each one, fancy I am able tell by the tone of them which are the voyeurs and which are not, which of them are potentially a threat, and which are innocent. I like to imagine Lesley's presence confuses the story-makers, who are perhaps expecting more your lone archetypal pervert/abductor/murderer of women – this being the generically grubby old man who besmirches the innocence of girls – or so the headlines scream, somewhat ironically from rags that make a fortune from

besmirching the innocence of girls.

There is just the one unfortunate incident.

I'm in the van brewing tea when a guy invites himself up the garden path with his iPad, filming. How we like to film each other, to frame each other out of context, and threaten with the weapon of humiliation via international mouse-click exposure. I hear the rubbing together of Milord Milner's hands as he serves his advertisements around the filth. But more than that, I hear Lesley scream. It's a fearsome sound, mind searing – not so much a scream of terror but a scream of aggression.

I drop a cup, break it, and am outside in a flash to find her already laying into him with kicks and punches. It's the local swine-thing who was waiting for me that first night after my release from the police station. He's still after his scoop then, his escalator to the starry heights of tabloid sleazedom.

But she seems to be doing fine, so I leave her to it.

He scuttles away, snatching up his broken device as he goes, races off in his car, bleeding from his nose. Lesley is white and trembling. I fear a charge of common assault laid against her, now, that she will be taken and had up in court, perhaps even sectioned for being insanely illiterate and vulnerable, and having the balls to defend herself. I'm sure this happens all the time.

"He was in my face, Mike. Wouldn't stop filming me. Hiding behind that thing and asking me these stupid questions."

"Questions?"

"Like who am I and what am I doing here, like it's any of his fuckin' business and I told him so and I told him to piss off, but he wouldn't go, just kept that thing in my face, so I went for him... oh... but... I'm sorry. I've made things worse haven't I?"

"Em... not necessarily."

Except of course I'm wondering now how long before the nice new van is surrounded by turd hurling swine-things again. At least this time we shall have them all in turn caught comprehensively on camera for their own embarrassment. But we'd been doing so well, regaining even a sense of normality.

Now the curse is upon us again.

Perhaps we should burn a scented candle?

You think I'm joking?

Her knuckles are sore and bleeding. I take her inside, clean them up, patch them with tape, find myself laughing.

"It's not funny."

"Of course it's funny. He looked like an idiot, and you fight like a tiger."

"Why do you think I ended up on the street?"

"I don't know. Anger? Temper? Sticking up for yourself?"

"Stickin' a veggie-knife in me mother's deadbeat boyfriend more like. So?... there you are then. That int' funny, is it?"

I admit, this revelation is somewhat sobering, but still: "Lesley... you weren't wrong."

She slides her eyes away. "No?"

"No."

We don't venture out for days, but that's fine because the rain settles in once more. And the police do not come. I don't know if Lesley's snarling face appears online because we deliberately do not look for it, but the swine things do not return and we take this as a sign things will blow over. It's unsettled her though, made her jumpy. Dark rings appear around her eyes as she lies awake listening for sounds in the night.

I wonder if Maggs has managed to move into that flat above the shop in Clitheroe yet, and if there's room for Lesley for a while.

Time for action, Mike: "I'll ring her."

"We said we couldn't."

"I know. We didn't have a good reason to at the time. But this is a good reason."

"No, I'll be all right."

"Change might do you good."

"Want rid of me? Is that it?"

"No."

"Okay then, so trust me. I'm fine."

"Okay."

Sex-Pest picks up homeless girl.

Yes, I'm wondering if the headline has already appeared, but I'm still censoring my inputs and am determined not to look. Perhaps Seacombe was right and things have blown over for us. Our story seems too complex to simplify to mere column inches when there are much easier stories to be had. I mean, everyone wants their moment of fame don't they? It isn't difficult to find a lurid headline, or imply one, and without the added risk of a bloodied nose. The swine-thing was trespassing. It was asked to leave. It refused. Lesley felt threatened and defended herself. We have proof.

On camera.

Backed up to the cloud.

So stop worrying, Mike.

be.free

What? Oh... that bloody thing again.

No... wait! It comes to me now! I have the laptop plugged into the massive TV. I've searched for "be.free" and it has popped up a gazillion links, but then I type "Bfree" by mistake and it links me to an old newspaper article titled: "Whatever happened to BFree?"

And then it all makes sense: *Seek.me.out.in.be.free*

Grace Milner has disappeared into a Massively Multiplayer Online Role Playing Game called BFree.

BFree?

I know, you're confused.

Allow me to explain.

Our online existence is characterised by a lack of all restraint. Have you noticed? It's as if when granted anonymity we revert to a kind of behaviour that is driven by the darker archetypal forces within us, the old vengeful and warlike pantheon of gods, whispering in our ear and goading us into madness. Thus people unknown to me have recently wished me both castration and a painful death, when face to face they might smile politely and tell me it is a nice day.

We see it in the comment sections of the online newspapers, or indeed even the most innocuous of fora. Discussions of beekeeping, say, are still liable to erupt into the most appallingly ill-considered language. The online world, the cyber world, the world of Milord Milner's data, does something extraordinary to us. It takes the brakes off reality, plunges us into the realms of infantile fancy, and nowhere more-so than in the peculiarly disturbing environment known as BFree.

Are you ready for this?

Okay...

Chapter Thirty-Four

At its peak, around seventy million people from all over the planet played BFree. It is a computer generated world – generated, that is, on a vast server-farm cooling itself naturally in the tundra of Alaska. In this virtual world you are represented by an avatar – that is a computer generated humanoid, a virtual doll whose appearance you can endlessly toy with.

Algorithms monitor your doings, and score you against the skills you acquire, the number of avatars who list you as friends, the number who block you as an undesirable foul-mouth. Your virtual net worth is taken into account as well – yes there's a thriving economy here – also the sophistication of your dress is somehow assessed by opaque algorithms and scored.

Players buy areas of the world, then landscape them, build houses on and rent them out to other players. They model furniture, jewellery and other body adornments such as customised penises and clitorises, (Clitori?) and sell them. Building experience and knowledge of programming also ups your scored Kudos. The most successful players are said to be making real-world livings at it, and the higher your rating the easier it is to progress, to move up the social ladder, to make more and more money.

I suspect it will be like this in real life soon – real humanoids scored and rated by an artificially intelligent algorithm. Points will be deducted for undesirable tendencies, as exposed I presume by one's facial features. In secret, perhaps this is already happening, the data brokers, like Milord Milner, being the only ones above the game, like Gods, capable of gaming everything to their perpetual advantage.

Unlike in real life though, in BFree you can pretend to be anyone you like, and no one cares because everyone's doing the same, surfing the shifting tides of their own identity, and identity is a looser concept than you might think. You find yourself creating an entire egoic reality for your avatar and living it. You can do anything you like and get away with it. Sure, offend someone too often and you'll get yourself banned, but then you just create another account, be someone else, start over from scratch.

It has an economy worth the equivalent of some small countries, and a listed dollar exchange rate, rumours too therefore of criminal money laundering, indeed rumours of all sorts of nefarious goings on, lending it an edginess that draws the world's youth who have always had a hankering to appear more worldly than they actually are. But above all, the thing to realise about BFree

is it's not a game.

What BFree is, exactly, has always been the subject of conjecture and many column inches in the tech mags and the features pages of what they used to call the broadsheets. The red-tops too have found ample material here for hysterical headlines. All the big name corporations moved in, built virtual offices, saw it as a place to advertise, to do business. It's like real life in most respects, except no one dies here. But if this is a vision of the afterlife, I pray for annihilation when my spreadsheet runs out.

Anyway, that was all a long time ago, back in the dim and distant pre social-media days when you'd go in and chat to people. Nowadays kids do that on their phones. Facebook and Twitter and Instagram have taken over, but BFree is still around, down to about a hundred thousand players now, and still flying the flag for a largely dystopic consumerist Shangri-la.

What in heaven's name is Grace doing in there?

I mean, she's not *really* in there. The machine hasn't swallowed her up, obviously. In reality, she's holed up somewhere with a fast Internet connection and set up an account with BFree, perhaps fashioned for herself an entire domain. And I'm presuming she wants me to seek it out, seek *her* out... in BFree.

The trouble is I remember what it was like, the dark places it could take you. You could buy things to make your dolly do things with other dollies. Sex I mean. Sex was always a major part of the landscape, so to speak. Any kind of sex you wanted, or at least a simulation of it. You could even pretend to be a girl, have yourself made love to by another girl – who was probably a guy in real life. The permutations were endless and troubling, the borderland between reality and imagination all smeared out and best not pondered for too long or you would go mad.

I played around with it for a while, back when I was on the road a lot. No, not the sex. I was tired of sex by then, did not discover it again until that night with Maggs. I don't know what I was looking for in BFree – an existential revelation perhaps. I didn't find it. Books were always safer, surer, and more permanent. You did not return, for example, to Conrad's "Rescue" to find it had morphed into one of Maggs' bonkbusters. In Bfree there is no permanence you see? The scenery can all too easily be deleted and replaced with something else.

Yes, those were the sunset days of my career, fruitless daylight hours spent

chasing dwindling orders, all of us like fish slapping about in an ever diminishing puddle, and nights spent in exorbitantly priced, faceless hotels, a laptop and WiFi affording some measure of escape from the banality of it. But BFree was the kind of place that mirrored oneself, which made it also empty for me, symbolic of a life lived under the delusion it would ever amount to anything real.

I wonder if my logins still work.

"Mike? What the f..."

So... my logins do indeed still work. Lesley enters at an inopportune moment to get my opinion on her latest picture, sees me focused upon the screen which depicts a man, standing in the midst of a field of giant trippy mushrooms. He's wearing an ill fitting jumper and a pair of zig-zaggy jeans. A tag floating over his head reminds me I used to go by the handle Rick Tuss. I must have found it amusing at the time, and there's nothing I can do about that now. For company he has a giant white rabbit, ten feet tall. The rabbit wears a bra and carries a machine gun, but seems otherwise docile. The rabbit's gender is unspecified, but it goes by the name of Dylan.

I did warn you about BFree.

Shall we continue?

"It's a kind of game..." I explain, somewhat embarrassed by the presence of the rabbit.

"I know what it is," she says. "Mums boyfriend used to play it. You know? Who's the rabbit?"

"Oh... I don't know. Last time I was in here this was a beach with a bamboo hut I used to rent, and there was a pretty little lighthouse out to sea – a bit like the Plover Scar light, come to think of it. But that was ten years ago. I used to play it when I was a salesman, on the road a lot. It was something to do in the hotel of a night, logon, wander about a bit, find someone to chat with."

"Why didn't you just find a pub?"

"Eh? Oh, good point. The thing is, in here, I suppose, you can just disappear if the conversation becomes difficult, or if the person turns out to be a psycho. Which goes to show, that for all of its promises, technology doesn't do much for our social skills, does it? Not that many were psychos. I actually met some decent characters. Sorry. Is this freaking you out?"

"Sort of. He... had this hobby, you see? Mum's boyfriend. He ran a brothel in there. Wanted me to play the part of one of his girls, take money off men for pretending – you know,... and that's when he found out I couldn't read or write. No use playing on there if you can't read or write is there?"

"Well, under those circumstances, I'd say it was no bad thing being unable to play, I mean. I'm sorry, Lesley. That's awful, and a most... peculiar thing to expect of you. He really wanted you to do that? But you couldn't have been very old then..."

"Fifteen. Left home soon after, but not because of that. Left because of... something else he did. Been on the streets ever since. It was either that or they called the police for what I'd done to him. I didn't try to kill him or anything. Just cut his knackers off. No... seriously. Didn't do that neither. Thought about it though. It was an accident, what I did, really. Just nicked him, like, in the arm. But I was angry. See?"

"Been on the streets, until now."

"What?"

"You're not on the street any more."

"Okay. I know. Keep forgettin'"

"All right. Look, I don't intend spending much time in here. It's just that..."

Just what?

I'm about to tell her I suspect this is where I'm going to find Grace Milner, but instinct makes me pause. We both have phones that listen, one with a device ID I know to have been compromised by the authorities and my knowledge of countermeasures is amateurish at best. Milord Milner's private security arseholes also know where I live. They might have planted something before my own security cameras went in. Layers of paranoia, yes? But these are strange times and I don't want to tell Lesley anything about all that in case it upsets her, I mean the thought we might be being listened to. I need to protect her, as well as Grace.

If she really is in here, no one else can ever know.

"Don't need to explain, Mike. It's just... I'd not want to interrupt you... that's all..."

"Interrupt me?"

"You *know*... doing... stuff. With the rabbit. Or whatever. Though... by the looks of it rather you than me."

"Eh? Oh... Lord. No... that's not what I'm up to at all. There's more goes on in here than that, Lesley."

"Not from what I remember there's not."

But there is. The whole of life is in here, or at least a curious caricature of it welling up from the unconscious and entirely uninhibited levels of its massive multi-player zeitgeist. Thus we encounter on every virtual street the balance of good and evil, and the forces that shape society too.

The rabbit is disturbing me as well, now – even though it appears to be asleep. I open up the on-screen map, pick a place at random and teleport myself there – not actually *me,* you understand, just my avatar – and I re-materialise in the midst of a cartoon forest. There is a neo-classical mansion nearby, and lawns, and a pole flying the Confederate flag of the southern United States. Its environs are taped off with dire warnings against trespass. It reminds me of the paranoia around Hammerton House and I have the feeling I may be arbitrarily shot, but the machine tells me there are no other avatars in the vicinity. And anyway, I remind myself, one cannot actually die as an avatar.

"Better?"

Lesley gives me a knowing smile, then leaves me to it.

So I settle into my new landing spot, search the directory for anything that includes the word Pythea and find a number of possibilities. These take the whole evening to root out and investigate. In the process I discover much weirdness, yet no clues as to Grace's whereabouts, nor her intentions.

It is mostly an empty world, too. The occasional avatar I do come across however seems more willing to engage than they were ten years ago, all be it only to pass wry comment upon my first generation costume, or my modest social score. To wit: at one point I am crossing a wide piazza in a faux Italianate town when a man with the head of a tiger drops a note-card on me, inviting me to partake of his night-club. When I ignore it, he messages me directly, calls me a noob and a cunt.

Nothing worse than to be called a noob in BFree – meaning an ingénue, a beginner entirely void of credibility. I point out to him the word 'cunt', has lost its sting with overuse and suggest he should get out of his bedroom, go to the pub and find some real people to speak to, or better still to read a book. He responds with a fury of kicks and punches to the person of my hapless avatar. This is a new feature, one I am not familiar with, this ability to inflict damage. One's prowess in the pugilistic arts also seems to be in direct proportion to one's social score, which means in short measure I am left in an immobile heap, keyboard frozen, virtual stars circling my head for a full five minutes. This is most inconvenient.

Tiger Man walks on.

I feel affronted. I suppose this is the equivalent of an ill considered comment left in one's social media feed. It's childish, yet undoubtedly hurtful and unsettling to one's ego which immediately seeks ways of avenging itself. My avatar is eventually restored to health, picks himself up, brushes himself down and my normally detached perspective comes to my rescue.

Whatever was the point of that?

Anyway...

I search for stuff on Delphi, it being the home of Pythea in classical Greece, and in this respect several locations reveal a more enlightened side to BFree, with architecturally accurate representations of the temple of the oracle. But there is only one with a secret, subterranean chamber whose walls are adorned entirely by the works of John William Godward, and one of them, of course, the over-young, and entirely naked, pigtailed muse herself. As soon as I walk my avatar in, I know I've arrived in the place where Grace wants me.

There are no further visual clues as to what comes next however, just the supposed throne of enlightenment poised over a rocky cleft, from which faux psychoactive vapours rise. It's all very beautifully done – the constructions, the exquisite texturing, the lighting. Clearly she has spent a lot of time in here. But the obvious question is: to what purpose?

By right-clicking on the throne, I am able to ascertain its owner – one Agnetha Godward - this being Grace's BFree handle, I presume. I look her up in the directory of avatars which tells me she is not currently online, but I can leave a message, which I do: *Greetings from Rick. God of small things* – the God of Small Things being the book I chose for her, what seems a lifetime ago now, and presumably by which she will know she has drawn the correct "fly" into her web. It's also a

phrase unlikely to mean anything to anyone else, should they be snooping, which is probable given the iron-brain like nature of the technology underpinning the BFree world.

When hiding needles in haystacks the iron brain is adept at finding them because needles are needles and easily searchable as items of data. So if you want to hide a needle in a haystack these days, it must look as much like straw as possible and be called something else entirely.

I don't ask what she wants. I'm assuming she'll get around to that. Indeed I'm not sure I really care what she wants, if anything – I mean I'm assuming all this subterfuge implies some sort of convoluted plan spanning both the real and the now half imagined world. I'll help if I can, but I realise her attraction lies in the renewed sense of purpose and the sheer animation she has injected into this one man's moribund life.

You don't know what I mean?

Think about it: before she came, I had nothing. You might say I have a good deal less now – certainly in terms of reputation, and material goods, neither of which amounted to much anyway. But on the other hand, since encountering Grace, I have acquired a lover and a daughter, and I have found the resolve to build my house, re-stake my claim in life, and more... shoulder aside all talk of death.

All right, the lover may be somewhat unrequited, but still...

Once we accept that sense of Grace back into our lives, we become immortal.

Chapter Thirty-Five

She was the first to break. Maggs, I mean. We'd left our cars on the little carpark by Linton Falls, walked the narrow wooden bridge across the break-neck ravine where the Wharfe tumbles through in a thunderous outrage of blackness and frothy spume. The river was in spate with meltwater and rains, and the bridge had a tremble to it as if rendered giddy by its own daring exposure to this explosive power.

The little path on the other side of the river led us between hedgerows to Grassington, and lunch. We'd climbed it at a leisurely pace, her arm slipped casually through mine. It's a distance of around half a mile, mostly uphill, and not once did she let go, but held me gently snug. We seemed a good fit, our pace well matched, as if we'd paired off young and grown into each others' idiosyncrasies long ago. She didn't speak and neither did I, content instead to bask in this strange familiarity of feeling, that it would be a very fine thing indeed to be possessed by Maggs.

I'd bought her lunch at the little café in town. We were still mostly silent, but by now it was the thought of our parting that had taken my tongue. I'd tried a few banalities as we ate, but they'd sounded forced, anxious and childish, giving away too much of my immature pining for this thing that petty reason denied us both. Maggs calmed me eventually with her presence, with her grace, but most of all with the warm weight of her companionable silence, just the occasional smile and a knowing look to jolly me along.

I'd felt sure she knew...

What I was thinking.

What I was feeling.

Still, why didn't I say something? Why didn't I make my feelings plain?

On our return we'd paused in the middle of that same bridge over the falls, she leaning on the rail and looking down, fearless, while I'd kept myself back, braced against the risk of giddiness.

"How long do you think we'd last?" she'd said.

I could barely hear her over the roar of the water. Her meaning was ambiguous, deliberately so. How long as a couple? Or how long if we

jumped?

"Would we be drowned first or dashed to bits on the rocks?" she'd pressed.

"Calmer water not far downstream," I'd said. "So one might be tempted to chance it. But sure, from up here, however you look at it, taking the plunge would seem like disaster, one way or the other."

It was cold still, a gloomy sky, no one around – unusual for that spot, which is always a draw with visitors. She'd shivered, hugged herself, cast me a shy glance. "You're not... in love with me or anything are you, Mike?"

Oooh, gotcha!

"That's the last thing you'd want to hear, right?"

"I don't know. It's always flattering for a woman when a man admits his feelings for her. I mean no matter how... inconvenient."

Inconvenient?

Nice one.

I trust she was being ironic.

Did she want me to admit it then? Did she need it to keep her warm through the cold and stormy nights that were coming? No, she hadn't wanted me to admit it, but she'd wanted to know all the same if it was true. She'd wanted to know without my admitting it.

Impasse.

"How could a man ever fall in love with a woman like you?"

"Well, exactly."

"I mean, it was just sex, right?"

"Just sex. Of course. Like we said."

"No big deal then."

"No big deal... so it changes nothing."

"Of course not. How could it? We're hardly teenagers. Anyway, I'd rather read a book these days than all that ridiculous huffing and puffing."

She managed a chuckle at that, blushed a little. "Quite," she'd said. And then: "I wonder how many lovers down the ages have held hands by these falls."

Was she asking me to hold her hand? No... scrub that, Mike. "Countless."

"Never amounted to much though, did it? I mean all that love. All that... huffing and puffing. And holding hands."

"The world's still a shallow, cruel, and crazy place, you mean? Sure. Love never counted for much in the great scheme of things."

Except it counts for everything, to everyone, all the time, doesn't it? Always has, at least in the universe of "one", unless you're corrupted by money of course, and then it's the huffing and puffing you strive for, because the only glimpse you'll ever get of your own immortality is in that brief moment of climax... no matter how feeble.

She'd granted me a smile then, a sort of understanding, or at any rate I suppose she'd not felt threatened by me, or by anything I might now do or say.

Story of your life, Mike?

"That said," she'd said. "You *will* find someone won't you? Someone to be with."

"You keep asking me that."

"But will you?"

"I don't know. Maybe I set my sights too high these days. Or maybe I'm too old to be with anyone for more than a night, or an hour, or even lunch..."

"Don't wait for me, Mike."

Was that a warning? I don't know. I'd felt a thrill at the thought of it all the same – I mean that she might have considered it a possibility, even though she'd killed it in the same sentence. "Why would I? Unless you wanted me to."

"Mike... I... This could take for ever. I mean..."

"Don't worry. This is still pillow talk, and we're supposed to be wide awake."

"It's just that... who knows what's going to happen?"

"Don't say any more. Come on, it's freezing out here. And this bridge is freaking me out."

Don't say any more, because in love it's better sometimes to nurture hope in the silences, than dare the truth and have your hopes dashed amid all the noise. I thought I'd grown out of that. I'd wait for ever if I had to, but I couldn't tell her so.

I was glad to get her off that bridge, something dangerous in it, in the mood, and in the moment. I still don't know what she wanted, other than to double underline the distance that was now to come between us, the space she needed to manoeuvre her way out, having used me as the means of psyching herself up to it in the first place.

Used me?

No, I don't mean it like that.

Truly, it was an honour.

I remember seeing our cars parked side by side. They were an unlikely couple, Mavis and the Yellow Bug, an incompatible, ageing elegance about them. I dug for my keys and she did the same.

"Well..." I said.

But whatever else I wanted to say was lost when she reached for me and I, following an instinct for warmth and sanctuary, folded into her, my face lost against the warmth of her cheek, and the softness of her hair, and all of it imbued with the warm waves, night scented, scented also... of Le Jardin.

I would not have broken that moment for anything. I would have stood all day with her like that, pubis hard to pubis, like teenagers who have discovered the heady charge of sex for the first time...

No, like I said, it was Maggs who was the first to break, a brief, chaste, and ever so decisive kiss planted on my lips, then holding me a moment at arms length, so she might gather breath, gather up her smile.

"See you on the other side, then," she said.

"Yes. But you'll call me... sometime?"

Over to you Maggs. I'm here, as always. At your service. That's what I'd meant. I think she gave a nod, I'm not sure. She was turning away when I said it, then she was driving, and I was watching, waiting for a backwards glance and a wave that didn't come. And like a spurned lover I imagined myself then forever consigned to history, because women have always been stronger in that respect than me. At partings, I mean.

I'm reliving all of this in that liminal state as we emerge from sleep into full consciousness. And I'm aware instead now of the sound of rain on the van roof, mingled also with the sound of the shower and the patter of Lesley's feet. She has become fastidious about her personal hygiene. I worry it may be obsessive, her constant washing, but have decided to give her time before I mention it. Clearly she feels she has much to wash away.

There's a frightened pause at the sound of the mailbox clanging shut – the postman delivering his daily deluge of junk and bills, and then she carries on.

I haul the mail in to sort out over coffee. The insurance reminder for Mavis, I assign to the pending-and-not-to-be-forgotten pile. A bank statement I assign to the vaguely-informative-and-to-be-shredded pile. Investment update – an irrational jump in share prices have yielded a not unwelcome bonanza, but one must recognise such a thing speaks more of this perpetual volatility in world markets and will most likely be wiped out by a similar swing in the opposite direction tomorrow – information absorbed, added to the shred pile. Invitations to partake of life insurance, PPI claims, roof cleaning and sealing, gold wrapped platinum credit cards, etc, etc, and numerous invitations ad nauseam, to switch energy supplier, broadband supplier, or partake of a gazillion pay per view TV channels, all of which I assign to the "recycle-immediately-without-opening-pile".

But there is also a letter, startling for its rarity and the fact such things are difficult to categorise these days. It's a real letter too, by the way, A6 envelope – hand written address, a neat hand, clear, incisive. Inside, there's a single sheet of quality notepaper, folded once. Blue ink on vanilla. And you must forgive me but my first thought is it might be from Maggs:

However:

Dear Mr Garatt

Regarding Grace Milner. I think we have much in common to discuss and swap notes. I was hoping you'd do me the honour of allowing me to buy you lunch? Friday. Quigley Arms, Ribchester. 1:00 pm?

It's signed by one Melvyn Judd.

So... not Maggs, then.

It's from lover-boy.

I'd forgotten about him. I imagine him now dishevelled and cowed after his time with the police, after the grilling, after the humiliation of that stinky room, and Seacombe's flint-like eyes upon him, unblinking for hours and hours, picking through the dross of his social media accounts, asking the same question over and over.

Did you really shoot this Lion, Mr Judd?

Have you a license for that gun?

Where do you keep it?

Maybe it's been the ruin of him – lost his job at the super-car showroom, lost his friends... lost his shiny suit. Did he pen this missive to me in desperation then, wearing nothing but a cheap vest and shorts? I don't know, but this is the story I'm imagining and it inclines me towards sympathy. It's also a very polite letter – one I find hard to credit to such a youth as he. It's as if...

Did someone older, write it for him?

The very fact of its paperiness – if such a word exists – impresses me, the letter I mean, obviously, but it also frightens me. No one writes a letter these days, but in a world where all electronic communication is stored in perpetuity for future snooping, it's much more discreet to write a letter. The recipient must memorise the contents and burn it of course, as noted in the Boy's Own book of spycraft – and I do – but not before photographing both note and card and posting directly to the clouds for my own future reference, if necessary. Yes, there are things I am hiding – from whom I don't know. But it's also useful to be aware of what it is wise not to hide, in case it can be of assistance to you later on.

There is no date on the letter, no indication of which Friday Melvyn intends

for our tryst, and this suggests a certain desperation on his part, indeed to the extent that he's keen enough to be there every Friday until I turn up. I'd say that says more about him than me, but of a sudden I appear keen enough to go, which makes me sound as desperate, which means he's read me well.

Desperate for what?

I don't know.

I know Seacombe has already advised me against further involvement with this nefarious shower and, were Maggs sitting across from me now, she'd be looking very stern, and I suspect I'd be adding the letter to the 'shred it now' pile and forgetting all about it, but I don't think Seacombe meant it – he spoke of choosing sides and being careful. At least what I think he meant was more simply this: beware.

And in the absence of Maggs, I've noticed the more my thoughts turn to Grace. Perhaps, given my past record, I was born to spend my life bouncing between two women, between contrasting desires, that I am forever incomplete without some form of bigamy to commit.

I don't mean this literally, you understand.

Chapter Thirty-Six

Anyway, Ribchester. Curious destination, a Roman town – at least when the empire of Rome stretched as far as the north of England. Some might say the region has been going steadily downhill ever since the Romans departed. It's not a big place, a village really, quite picturesque on a curve of the Ribble, and sleepy in a gritstone, old stone, country sort of way. There's still money here, country seats of the county set hiding behind trees and long gravel driveways – yes, even Lancashire has its county set, or the "County Lancaster" to quote it posh.

In addition to its archaeology however, Ribchester is a bridge over the river, and the White Bull public house, famed for its Roman columns, re-purposed from the ruins of antiquity. That was another of my watering holes with Sandra in the olden days. The White Bull. I see her sitting there in the blaze of summer, a glorious perm of big-hair, sunglasses nestling on top, a gin and tonic tipped half way to her lips, and a smile as she catches my eye... the sudden memory of it now is like a hook snagged in my heart.

But anyway, yes, it seems we are, albeit temporarily, a spy story again, or something of the sort, or perhaps worse we aspire to be a page-turning mystery thriller? If that's not what you signed up for, I apologise and beg you to bide with me, that normal service will resume shortly, though what constitutes normal service I have no idea: musings on what I can see through a shop window perhaps? Doesn't sound too great does it? Not much of a pitch to a literary agent. It's fortunate then I won't be bothering. As regards the momentarily intrusive intrigue, I suppose I'm just curious to know how Melvyn came to know my address.

Let me see: hypothesis one: Seacombe gave it to him – unlikely but not impossible. Hypothesis two, the swine things posted it online somewhere – again possible, but not supported by contra-leaning evidence to wit: I have not been inundated by parcels containing turds or dead animals, or any of the other calling cards of psychopaths and trolls. Or three, he has gleaned it from conversation with Vic Bartlet, this latter being to my mind the most likely scenario, and the one I shall assume.

I recall Vic did not speak well of Melvyn, was jealous of him, Vic being slave to the Peter Pan syndrome that afflicts many men of our age. No doubt he allowed himself frequent imaginings of himself atop Grace, and she begging for it. Perhaps he seized upon Melvyn then as a useful idiot, in the same way he seized upon me. The pair of them are presumably still motivated to learn as

much about Grace's relationship with the hapless Mike Garatt as possible – Vic in order to keep his job, and Melvyn so he might punish her when he finds her, or even smother her in kisses – who knows?

And my reasons for being here? Apart from what I've already admitted to, and am in any case beginning to doubt now, I am thinking I might learn something more about Grace from him. What that might be, I don't know, but I'll be glad for anything he inadvertently betrays due to his careless assumption I already know it. As for his offer to swap notes, I don't believe a word of that, but then duplicity has always been the name of the game surrounding Grace. I mean the game she fled.

My name is Grace and I am a lie.

And for my own benefit, I realise what I have already learned from my passing and somewhat prurient vignette of Vic Bartlet with this trousers down, is I find the idea of sexual relations with Grace reassuringly improper, that the power she has over me lies solely in my desire to preserve, at all costs, her virginity, her innocence, her grace. I'm speaking metaphorically of course. I'm speaking of a kind of virginity akin to divinity that stirs within the breast of every man, whether he understands it or not.

And usually we don't – understand it, I mean.

Usually we only want to shag it.

But, no way...

Okay?

So, where am I?

Ah, right...

I'm just pulling onto the carpark of the Quigley Arms. Mavis is warning me, ever more persistently now, to Avoid Bull Shit, or Bad Sex, or Bad Shit, or whatever. But for now, what immediately strikes me, is there's a very large, very white Maseratti in pole position. I recognise it from Melvyn's Social Media feed, the memory of which also reminds me of the fact he's an aspiring high roller and a twat who shoots lions for fun, and what's more it seems he hasn't fallen very far from grace at all – or at least he hasn't lost his car, which, as we all know, is nine tenths of a single man's pride – it serving as proxy for his willy.

I have a feeling my story for him is wrong.

But then I tell myself even super-car salesmen don't make much money, that for all its be-suited pretensions, it's a trade but one step from the precariat, relying as it does on the cutting and thrusting against one's colleagues to make any sort of headway against penury.

And the car is not his. It belongs to the company. He merely has use of it as a sort of mobile advertisement. He is not then himself an aristocrat, I mean in the modern sense, but a man who would nevertheless woo the County into opening their doors to him, his social media feed being his carefully crafted calling card, and princess Grace, daughter of the unimaginably monied Milord Milner, his own passport to proper riches.

So tell me more, Mike…

Well... all right...

They met on holiday, in Monte Carlo, perhaps? She was freshly off her father's battleship, and Melvyn strolling the beach in his Speedos. I've seen him without a shirt, and much else, and must admit he is a good looking specimen of expensively buffed masculinity, and not forgetting those weirdly luminescent teeth. And Grace is young and maybe she thought "I wouldn't mind wrapping myself around some of that". And, like many of his sort I've had the misfortune of meeting over the years, he no doubt talks a good job too.

Certainly he would pass muster with the monied, at least at the purely decorative level, and if he could only make himself useful to them as well, he'd surely be in. But the way Grace saw "making himself useful" was not the same way he saw it.

Was it?

When they held hands, she wanted him to lead her out of that world, while he expected her to lead him in.

Okay, so... hold that thought for now. Let's get back to the Quigley.

It wasn't always called the Quigley. I forget now what it used to be, but a lesser sort of establishment altogether, plain pub food and uninteresting beers. But no longer. The Quigley is gentrified, the upper end of the market being the only end worth investing in these days, while the rest of us must make do with dry burgers and generic lager. Here there are booths and wine, and

uniformed staff, all of them ridiculously pretty girls with blonde hair, blue eyes, and the name 'Quigley' embroidered possessively on their bosoms.

"Mr Garatt?"

Ah... how sweet. He recognises me. Saves awkwardness, I suppose.

He's changed his hair, waved it a bit, made himself appear more feminine in the face. Immaculate suit, sober grey, not shiny, handkerchief in the top pocket. He's grown up, deepened since I saw him last. I'm nervous of course, remembering my little deception when I bearded him in his space-age den, feigned interest in a sports car, and I don't want that to colour things between us. But I have the feeling that's not where he remembers me from. After all, why would he? I was just one more hapless punter he'd tried to rob – though admittedly not very hard.

No he had me sussed from the beginning!

More likely it is from my various appearances in the tabloids, or from the photograph Vic Bartlet has shown him, a photograph taken by the robot-drones that patrol Hammerton House, and me standing there with my mouth wide open, gawking like a simpleton.

His detention by the cops has definitely not sullied him. Indeed, he shines, oozes confidence and foppish charm – or is this an overcompensating disguise? A manicured hand is extended in greeting, which I take, and we sit down like businessmen at ease, secure in our professional tryst.

"Mr. Judd."

"Melvyn, please."

"Mike."

Thus are the niceties dispatched, smiles engaged, defence shields warmed in readiness, radars turned up to full wick. But I remind myself I am no longer negotiating another six months of work for the foundry. Indeed, I don't know what I'm negotiating any more.

Yes you do, you idiot… you're looking for something.

I realise the arc of my story is like the parabolic path of a projectile launched into the void, kicked off in that first chapter, long ago. At some point it needs a link, a key, a yank on the chain to pull it back to earth and usher in a

conclusion of sorts. After all, it cannot rise for ever into the soapy heavens, for what sort of story would that be?

What is it then that links us all together?

Okay, fine. It's this I'm searching for. Like everything else about me, this is an existential quest. Others would seek the factual mystery in this meeting, while I seek the existential meaning.

"Thanks for coming, Mike," he says – a little over-friendly – and then: "I'm sorry for your trouble. Seems like you got swept up in this dreadful business entirely by accident."

"Thank you. Yes. Is there any news of Grace?"

He gives me a brief shake of the head, something reluctant about it too; he is not here to answer questions, but neither does he seem at all heavy with grief. He knows she's not dead then. He knows she's not been kidnapped. He knows she's run away, that his passport to unimaginable riches has deserted him, and he wants it back before it exceeds its sell-by date.

Poor Grace.

This is what he hides.

"You came out of it pretty badly," he says. "All that nasty press coverage. And I heard they burned your v... I mean your place down."

Ah... interesting. Did you catch that? He avoids the word 'van', replaces it with 'place' – he's sensitive. He seeks to avoid its connotations of poverty and 'trailer trash', and the risk of alienating me with the gap between us, I mean socially, monetarily, but perhaps most of all *aspirationally*.

Or is it more that I'm sensitive to these things myself?

He concludes his opening lines with a flourish. "So anyway, how are you managing?"

Over to you, Mike.

Ta Daaaa!

What's this? He feigns concern? Or is it genuine? It's hard to tell. He's gained

much by way of opacity since I last saw him, his transparent veneer perhaps having tarnished by proximity to the corrosive vapours of Vic Bartlet.

"Oh, not so bad," I tell him. "And you were in the papers yourself, I noticed."

He blushes at the mention of his own brief notoriety. "Well... yes. I was a bit of an afterthought by the investigating team. Got off pretty lightly. I think the press, and the police were all hoping it was you, actually."

"Oh?"

"I wasn't much of a story was I? You know – the boyfriend did it? What's so new about that? And we so crave novelty these days, don't we?"

Ah, nice one, Melvyn. Respect. I had not taken him for a philosopher. Also, he's joking. For sure then, he knows Grace is not dead, or he would not joke. He offers a tight little smile, possibly humour, but also tempered by the reminder he is indeed missing his girlfriend, who is at least supposed to have been murdered or kidnapped or... something... and therefore he must be seen to be contrite so long as I am his audience.

Oh, for heaven's sake: "I don't know where she is, Melvyn."

"Well, of course not. Why would you? Any more than I know myself."

Yes, he seems genuine in this, an avenue worth exploring perhaps? So ask him: "Can you tell me what happened? When did you last see her?"

His expression tightens. No, he's not for offering anything, but then I see him struggle with it. I imagine Vic Bartlet whispering darkly into his ear, but then a chink opens and a bit of independent light issues forth – bait perhaps, something to lure me in for the chop later on.

"She didn't come home," he says. "Left all her stuff... clothes, jewellery... bank account hasn't been touched..." His words trail off. There's more he could tell me, for sure there is, but the spectre of Vic Bartlet is looming over his shoulder.

"Home? You mean Hammerton House?"

"No... not that ghastly place. Have you seen it? It's like an open prison. No... she was staying with me. We'd been living together... for a bit."

"Ah." Now *that's* interesting. And how terribly inconvenient for Vic and his security team. How galling too for Vic to be daily updated on Grace and Melvyn's "intimacy".

"Last thing we know is she visited your shop."

This latter statement is thrust out like a lance, a thing intended more to catch me off balance than to wound, I trust, but I'm able to parry it. "Not my shop," I remind him. "I just volunteer there. How do you know she called in?"

He said *we*. Did you catch that? *Last thing we know.* I'm definitely still talking to the machinery of Hammerton House then. He is here acting mostly as their instrument, but there are bits of him in the mix too. Melvyn, for all of his cool, his considered words, and his sartorial elegance, is in a bit of a tizz. He still wants in, wants to please them.

"Someone saw her," he says.

"You mean Vic Bartlet's people? Yes I know about them. Vic's already spoken to me about it. I wonder what the going rate is for personal protection of that sort."

Melvyn looks away, uncomfortable, a touch nervy now. "You're a friend of Vics?"

I wonder; would it be more productive to be a friend of Vic's or not? I choose not, on the assumption Vic Bartlet is a man who gets on everybody's nerves. But then again, a man who scares everyone like that... might he not be useful as an imaginary friend, in certain circumstances?

No. Let's not go there, Mike.

"Hardly. He used to run security at the firm I worked for. Haven't seen him for years. But suddenly he pops up asking me about Grace. I couldn't tell him anything more than I told the police, but he didn't seem interested in what the police knew or what they were doing. So all of that tells me there's something weird about this whole business, Melvyn."

"Weird?"

Try a little openness, Mike: "Have you considered the possibility she's just hiding..."

Of course he's considered it. Everyone's considered it by now. And the sooner

we stop beating around bushes the better.

"Hiding? Who from?"

"Her life? Her father? The protection people who follow her about all the time? That would drive me nuts. Or maybe it's the money? Or maybe you? Or just... everything. Have you never felt like that? The desire to get away from everything."

He's not moved to laughter – even false laughter – nor does the suggestion he might be part of the problem solicit much of a response. But he's wondered about all of these things, including the fact she might be hiding from him – at least in part. I'm convinced it's true then: Grace wanted out, through him, while he wanted in through her. When she realised his game, she knew she was on her own and had no choice but to disappear.

Now that's an interesting story!

He's shaking his head, a little too hard now. "Nah!"

I shrug. He takes it as an admission of my fallibility, that I'm merely shooting the moon, or that perhaps my grey matter is disintegrating, while his remains as firm as his buttocks. He forgives me for it, uses the opportunity to remind me we're here for lunch, loses himself in turning the pages of the menu.

"So what do you fancy?" he says. "A drink? Forgive me, I've not offered you a drink. You're a beer man? They have a good selection."

"Just fizzy water thanks."

I note Melvyn is already comfortable with a large glass of wine. Personally I would be less confident of avoiding breathalisation by the coppers, or perhaps stand-out motors like his are exempt from scrutiny, unless of course you have the wrong colour of skin.

"The food here's really something," he goes on. "What would you like? Do you know this place?"

Yes, he's definitely nervous now, choppy, trying to move things on, and away from the nature of his relationship with Grace, back onto the questions he's supposed to be asking me.

"I remember it in a former incarnation," I tell him.

The menu is rather expensive. A full luncheon with Francified spelling is the equivalent of several day's labour for the precariat. The soup du jour translates roughly to Broccoli and Stilton with croutons and a sprinkling of dried fancy bits. I insist on paying for both it and the fizzy water myself. He stiffens a little at this rebuff, but it sets the right tone, that I am not to be bought, that I am not to be seduced by croutons or dried fancy bits dropping from Milord Milner's table.

"So... why did you stalk her?" he says.

Ah, a cutting come-back, and well done, Melvyn. About time too.

"I mean, you did... stalk her. Didn't you, Mike?"

Okay, we're getting to it. I take a deep breath, hold it a while. Careful... let him stew in the silence for a bit. Now, out with it: "She's a beautiful woman, Melvyn. Dresses well – unusual these days, especially in Middleton. She stood out. Now I know why. Even her jeans were haute couture."

He's waiting for more, seems unsatisfied when he realises there isn't any. "Is that it? She dresses well? Come on, Mike."

"Well, like I told the police, like I told George Milner's PA – she dropped some books off at the shop. One of them had her card in it. She'd been using it as a bookmark, I suppose, and forgotten to take it out. So I was nosey, and looked her up online. Facebook. Instagram. That sort of thing. She was very easy to find, at least the side of her she wanted to project. Her real identity, she was careful, or ashamed to mention at all. I didn't realise she'd disappeared by then, and her stuff was being monitored – hell of a shock when the cops turned up at my door. I didn't know they could do that – I mean that it was so easy as that."

"Is that not a bit... creepy?"

"That they can find you like that, from just a few mouse-clicks? Damned right it's creepy."

"No... I mean you. You looking her up. Stalking her online."

"Oh, that was just idle curiosity. Have you never done anything like that?"

"Well, yea, but..."

"But what? When you do it you're a young buck on the lookout for pussy – even if it's just fantasy pussy. When I do it, it's disgusting. Listen, you don't lose your eye for a pretty young girl once you turn fifty you know. It's only creepy if you intend doing anything about it, which I did not."

"So what is it then... when a man gets to your age, Mike?"

"Serious?"

"Sure."

Humour me, he's saying. Okay, this should be interesting, for both of us: "Well... I mean in the existential sense, don't you find beautiful women life affirming?"

"Life affirming?"

No. I can see he's not particularly open to ideas of that sort. I don't suppose I was at his age either. No point in elaborating further along those lines then.

"Something like that... yes. Hard to explain."

Fortunately he's as keen to change direction as I am. "You do know who her father is, don't you?" he asks – something sour in his tone.

"Yes, of course. Do you know her family well?"

"Better than you ever will."

Ah... abrasive, now! Am I ruffling feathers? "I don't know them at all, Melvyn. And I have no desire to."

"Oh? Meaning what?"

Okay, there he goes. He's off his perch now. We're both still smiling, but him like a crocodile, and he's colouring. I don't suppose he's beyond making a shouting scene in public either. The moneyed and their aspirants have a peculiar sense of self entitlement, also a total lack of respect for the sensitivities of innocent bystanders. So calm him, Mike, reel him in a little.

"I don't know what you'd hoped to gain from our meeting, but if we're to gain anything we need to be honest with each other. I'm old enough to be Grace's father, and I'm not in the habit of courting the favours of girls half my age."

"Courting the?..."

"We both know Grace has not been kidnapped, or murdered. She's run away. Why would she do that? You're more likely to know than I am."

He's is evasive, a little surprised I can be so confident in my interpretation of the facts. "She's not been in touch then?"

Don't worry, I'm not going to reveal anything to him. I am, it seems, as competent a liar as anyone else I've met thus far. "Why would she? I'm nothing to her."

"So you say."

"Melvyn, why would I lie? She came into the shop a couple of times, looking for books, and that's that."

He thinks on this for a moment, realises he's going to have to offer something substantial in exchange for real information.

"I understand... you want money," he says.

"Money? You mean you're going to open your wallet and what?... peel off a couple of fivers or something?"

"A hundred thousand for information leading to her discovery."

Now that gives me pause. Well, it would wouldn't it? It's momentarily stunning, not just the amount of money, but the casual manner with which he tosses it out – not literally of course – but the way he sits back, prim in his appearance, and the lack of hesitation. A high roller, indeed. Except it's not his own money he's putting up, is it?
It never is with people like him.

"That's a big number." Indeed, yes. It would go a long way towards building my house. "But it doesn't alter the fact I don't know where she is."

Well, I don't do I? He's not listening, but in his doggedness he feeds me a useful morsel. "It wouldn't be the first time."

"I know. She's probably done it before. I get that."

"You think you get it, but you don't. You're a mature guy who works in a bookshop. Right?"

"Granted."

"That's Grace's thing you see?"

"Older guys who work in bookshops? Come on... What? Seriously?"

"Look... I didn't know about this, right? I didn't know she'd done it before. Gone missing, I mean. Otherwise I might not have called the police that second time. I just panicked, that's all. I should just have gone and talked to her father. I didn't know she had *form*."

"Form?"

"Last time, they found her living over a bookshop in Manchester with some old guy."

"No! When was this?"

"Couple of years ago."

"Well, have you been back there to check? Sorry if I'm stating the obvious."

"She's not there, Mike."

"She was actually *living* with this guy?"

"Not in the biblical sense, at least she said not. Creepy bastard though. She was... working there, she said... living over the shop."

Now this is interesting! So, Grace was doing what? Escaping her wealth by immersing herself in literature? Teaching literature... working in a bookshop? That's not a bad story, not a bad moral is it? When you can already buy anything you want, what else is there?

Hell, Grace... you're starting to amaze me.

"Look, I really don't understand this, Melvyn. It's not like she's under age. She's a grown woman. If she wants out, why can't everyone just leave her alone? Let her be what she wants to be."

"Because she's sick, Mike. Obviously."

"Oh, come on, don't be so patriarchal. Her father sounds like a control freak,

barking mad probably, and he's paranoid his wealth has made him a target for all manner of ne'er-do-wells. Vic was even ranting about Russian mobsters – and I presume he believes that potential for harm spreads by proxy to Grace as well. That's all there is to it. She's better off out of it, if that's what she wants, and it would appear that it is."

"Well, that's your opinion. But seriously, she's not well, Mike. I mean who in their right mind would want to run out on all of that?"

You really don't get it, do you, Melvyn?

"Well... if you're really determined to find her, it might be worth speaking to this bookshop guy anyway. He could have some clues. More than me at least. She might have been in touch with him. It would make sense, given that she knew him from before."

"Tried it, Mike. He's saying nothing. Total vow of silence."

"Have the police spoken to him?"

"Not that I'm aware of."

"But you have?"

"A little while ago. Drove over there – after the police questioned me – humiliating experience that by the way. How was it for you? Treated me like shit. Never mind. Anyway, he's just this tired old fart in a tweed jacket. Complexion like candle-wax. Smelled of piss and mints. Could barely get a coherent word out of him."

Ah!

I see him, this old guy. He is Lao Tzu, sitting in his bookshop, inscrutable expression while Melvyn drips oil and smarm all over the place.

The tweedy man in the bookshop sounds very Zen. Could it be my muses are leading me to the Senex, to the wise old man who will reveal all? I mean, that's how it works isn't it? in tales of journeys to one's own centre, the centre of one's own navel.

Yea right.

But are we thinking the same thing here, you and I? Might he speak to me – one tweedy gentleman to another? Worth a try, but how do I find out his

name?

"Would you like me to talk to him, Melvyn?"

"Why would he talk to you?"

"I don't know. We have bookshops in common. Tweed jackets... old age... perhaps?"

He sighs, giving the impression he doubts I can be of any use, but spills the beans anyway, which I was not expecting: "Donnegans - some sort of charity shop. But like I said the guy's lost his marbles."

"Donnegans, did you say?"

He nods.

Okay, I wasn't expecting that either. But before we get too carried away you should know there's a Donnegans in most towns these days. If cheap old books are your bag, it's a Donnegans you'll be drawn to eventually, both on and off line.

"Christoph."

"What?"

"Christoph Donnegan. Queer name that. Half Greek, half Irish. God knows how he manages – he has the look of someone who can't even tie his own shoelaces, let alone run a bookshop. But I told you you'll get nothing out of him."

"Em... well, one can but try."

Christoph... Chris Donnegan?

Maggs' Chris?

Our Chris?

Thus it seem, by sleight of hand, I have produced the hook that turns the rocket, that turns our story towards its conclusion, a tying up of loose ends, however inelegant and unlikely it looks from this distance. But I'm not thinking about any of that right now – curious though it is, this link, this genial tease of a twist. What I'm thinking more is it gives me an excuse to ring

Maggs.

Yes, Maggs!

It's an excuse to see her again, while dancing around the real reason. After all it's one thing to ask if we can meet and speak about Chris Donnegan, quite another to ask if I can simply go and be with her for a while, isn't it?

How totally I am besotted, transformed by the memory of that night.

Where was I? The Manchester shop? Yes, Maggs has talked about it. I am vaguely aware of it, as one is vaguely aware of London, but neither place is really on our beat, so to speak, and even Manchester these days is another country to me.

Melvyn takes an unbecoming gulp of wine, sits back, looks somewhat foolishly satisfied. I mean, seriously, cat-that-got-the-cream satisfied, and I don't know why. He's lured me here with the promise of a free lunch, thinking to wheedle information out of me. I end up paying for my own lunch and getting more out of him than he intended giving. My virtue is intact, and Vic will be furious.

Unless...

Unless this is exactly what they wanted, to wind me up like a clockwork mouse and point me in that direction all along. They must know I work for Donnegans, and even I would grant that's sufficient grounds to suspect a conspiracy. So, they compromise my phone, then drop the rather broad hint that Chris Donnegan may have information regarding Grace, so I run over there, sit down with him, tweedy man to tweedy man. The pair of us start musing like lovelorn teens, and spilling information while Vic records everything we know.

About Grace.

Perhaps whatever they planted on my phone has yet to be activated. Perhaps they don't even know I threw it away yet.

Hell! Is it possible?

"So, Mike... what car do you drive?"

Eh? Car? Sudden change of subject noted. Ah... okay. The seed is sown. Now cover it over and pat down the soil. Move on to other things. Deploy the

smoke and mirrors. Fine, I can play that game too.

"Em... an old MX5."

"Two Litre?"

"One point six."

"Brake horse?"

Shrug. Don't know. "About one twenty I guess."

"Get about four fifty out of the old Maz."

The Maz? Oh, he means the Maserati.

Yes, Melvyn, your willy is definitely a lot bigger than mine. Be content to waggle it about if it restores your sense of pride. Go shoot a lion or two if it will prove your manhood. Thus we proceed to lunch with car talk, which is not without its pleasures, and Melvyn, for all of his oily foppishness is not without his charms either. But he is clearly seduced, lost to the allure of that most precious of banes. I'd advise him to drop the Milners like a hot potato while he can, be content in being a good salesman of second hand super-cars, to look after his customers and guard his own virtue. But I don't.

He must mind his own virtue.

As I must mind mine.

Chapter Thirty-Seven

Volunteering at Donnegans was just a means of getting out for me and, frankly, other than the love of books, I really didn't care what charity it supported. Disaster relief? I think I read that somewhere, remember also thinking it was futile, you know? A typhoon tears the top off a tropical island and here we are scratching together a few coppers, and thinking it'll make a difference. But it does, a little, and in any case it's better than looking the other way.

Still, after paying the loyal lieutenants, like Maggs, and paying rent on the shops, Christoph Donnegan can't have much left. There were days when we barely took twenty quid at the Middleton branch. Days when we took nothing. A dog-eared paperback of poems by John Clare might be considered a treasure in the right hands, but on the balance sheet it's about fifty pence, which doesn't exactly buy much charity, does it?

But here's the thing: Unlike Milord Milner's money raking empire, Donnegans is strictly, and all too obviously, small change. If it wasn't, if it was raking in millions, the Milord Milners would be sniffing round, muscling in, using it as a tax dodge as well as signalling their own false virtues.

And Christoph himself is probably managing on a pension or something. If he clears a hundred quid across the whole of the region and that buys a crate of bottled water for a war-torn country ravaged by typhoid, it's at least a step in the right direction – and better than a hundred quid dropped in a restaurant, like Melvyn and me between us, on a meal we could probably have skipped anyway.

That's what Donnegans is about.

Small changes.

Small things.

Isn't it?

Like how the small thing of walking into Donnegans that first day changed everything for me. There was Maggs, sitting, looking up from behind the desk, a little prim, a little frosty, and I'm mumbling about wanting to volunteer and wondering if there's an interview and a waiting list, and her face melts into a half smile, but without quite losing its authority, and she asks me if I can start right away. Most of the volunteer crew is off with flu and what-

not – same old story – and she's barely holding things together... and that was that.

Was it the same with Grace? Did she just wander in one day like I did, and volunteer? Did she then become bound up in the dreamy bookshop vibe and merely forget to go home? As a story, it works, so let's go with it for a while at least until we're disabused by more tangible facts.

So she rented the flat over the shop while she got her head together, and immersed herself in the dream of freedom for as long as she could. Then Vic found her, took her back to that view of the world's most expensive lake.

She will be made to stare at that false promise of a lake until she goes blind, a lake filled to a safe but uninspiring shallowness by concrete.

There must have been rumours, tittle-tattle, hear-say... gossip I mean, of her time at Donnegan's. Maggs must have heard something. So go on, Mike, phone her, ask her!

All right, I will!

But I'm nervous dialling, fluff it several times and when I do get it right, the phone goes to answer, and I haven't the presence of mind to leave a message. But then I reason it's much easier to pitch this face to face, thus when, after several days of trying I fail to connect with her, I decide to motor over to Clitheroe, make enquiries of the Donnegans branch there, since I presume that's where she's sleeping now.

Yes, the enigma of Grace Milner still intrigues me, but I've had nothing from her in ages, and truth be told I am motivated more by the simple desire to see Maggs, see if she's all right, and if there's anything I can do.

But if we peel that layer of truth open a little more, we find the deeper kernel of truth, that I want to feel again the thrill of her presence, and read in her once more the unspoken promise that the last time we made love would not actually be the last time. And that's a dangerous way for a guy of my age to be thinking, which is why Lesley travels with me, because I'm less likely to make a fool of myself if she's there too.

It's the first warm spring morning of the year and she asks if we can travel topless – Mavis I mean, of course. Drop the rag-top. She rides with her arm upon the door, glass down, hair blowing. Then, after a few miles, declares herself to be 'fuckin' freezin', slides the glass back up and yanks on a hat.

"Lookin' forward to seeing Maggs then?" she asks.

"I am, yes."

We are entering Clitheroe's main street, bound for the car-park on the far side of town, but in passing we try to pick out Donnegans from the rows of other shops.

"Want me to stay in the car? Don't want to cramp your style or anythin'."

"Style? Me? No... I need you to be my chaperone."

"Your what?"

"I mean... don't you want to see Maggs too?"

"'Course, but..."

"I'd like you come in with me."

Clitheroe is a busy little town in the valley of the Ribble, upstream from Ribchester. There are plenty of artisanal businesses here the likes of which fled Middleton years ago. There are hardware shops, bakers, butchers, even a candlestick maker. I wonder what the secret is to this air of eclectic, low-key prosperity and how Middleton could possibly borrow some. I spy Donnegans, nestled between a café and a confectioners. It's not yet noon, midweek, and the pavements are already bustling. It must be quite a thriving little bookshop, given the passing trade.

Above it I see the single window of the flat I presume she's living in now and my heart sinks. The paint is flaking from the frame, a meagre, gloomy privacy afforded by a drooping and grubby net curtain. I do not like to think of Maggs living in such a place as that for fear it will tarnish her.

It's an ill omen.

Foolish to think it, I know, but I cannot shake the feeling, and it takes my tongue. We leave Mavis on the car-park by the railway station, and retrace our steps.

"Everythin' all right, Mike?"

"Oh yes, fine."

My smile is forced, and she picks up on it. "Not much company am I?" she says.

"Eh? Oh... you must never think that. You can be whatever company you like in my company. I mean... in my company you must feel free to simply... be whomever you want to be."

She brightens. "Really?"

"Well... within reason. I'm just frightened that's all. I have an odd feeling suddenly."

We enter Donnegans. There's a cheerful tinkle from the bell – Maggs' touch surely? Then comes the familiar heady rush in the scent of books past their first flush. There's a white haired lady behind the till. I toss her a cheery good morning, but it falls flat. Indeed she appears to be sucking on something sour.

"Maggs in today?" I ask.

She doesn't know who Maggs is.

"Area manager. You know?"

No, she does not. She rarely volunteers here, is merely filling in for 'Jeremy', who is late.

"Margaret?" I try. "Margaret Cooper?"

Is it Margaret though? Is it not Margery, or even Imogen? Strange you do not know the proper name of your lover, Mike? Has she not told it to you? Not even on the pillow? I fear not.

Just as well then she is hardly your lover.

I mean, one night doesn't exactly seal the deal, does it?

One night, is after all, just one night.

What?

Oh... focus, Mike, Dammit!

I'm still not getting through, and the dry old dame is beginning to harbour

suspicions. And, since we have patently not come to buy books, our welcome is fast expiring.

"I believe she's renting the flat above," I tell her, but that's all the help I'm giving her. She's on her own now. Sink or swim.

Both of us.

But the flat is empty, or rather it is full... of as yet unsorted stock. And she doesn't know who the area manager is. She is merely filling in for 'Jeremy', who is filling in for 'Daisy' who cannot come in today, and if 'Jeremy' doesn't turn up in another half an hour to take over, she'll be closing the shop and that's that, and who will miss it anyway? All these old books. And jigsaws – jigsaws with pieces missing most likely. I mean who'd risk a quid on one of those?

I ask you!

Jigsaws?

That's different. I take her point about the missing pieces though – hard to verify the completeness of the solution to a puzzle unless we are to spend our time completing every one first. And is it better not to bypass the puzzle altogether for one you know is solvable? For such is life.

No, perhaps jigsaws are not such a good idea after all.

But her struggles sound familiar and I wonder briefly about volunteering to help, but that would open a can of worms.

And you're here on other business, Mike, remember?

"Would Jeremy know Maggs?"

Jeremy wouldn't know much about anything, him being of rather a simple disposition, dear. And you would be?

"Oh... I'm Mike Garatt. I work at the Middleton branch. And this is Lesley."

I'm thinking to engage her in a collegiate way now, but this too falls flat. She has heard about all that trouble in Middleton of course, broken windows and such, and drunken loutery. Middleton is not well thought of any more, if indeed it ever was, nor I suppose, by association are we Middletonians, not withstanding the fact the trouble was caused by transient and inebriated

football fools waving their big tit red-tops. And then, worse, I think she recognises me from my brief notoriety among the pages of those same red-tops, and adopts at once a more defensive posture, is also puzzled by Lesley, who has felt the disapproving vibes and takes my arm, tugs me back towards the door.

"C'mon, Mike. Let's go. Wasting 'yer breff."

She's right. Maggs clearly isn't here, hasn't been for a while. As I make for the door, deflated in my defeat, I notice a copy of Slaughterhouse Five hanging precariously from the shelf, among authors listed alphabetically under "M", which is irritating, since it should of course be under "V" for "Vonnegut". Alan would have a fit.

I know you might think this yet another a pointless aside, but I've not read any Vonnegut, and you know second hand bookshops? they work on the impulse principle, such that we bookworms sometimes even think the universe speaks to us through mouldy old books coming at us by chance this way.

No,.. seriously.

"So,... how much for this on then?"

"Like the sign says. It's two ninety nine, dear. Buy one get one free."

Clearly the Clitheroe branch operates a more independent line on pricing than the rest of Donnegans, which charges a pound a book, or two for one. No gimmicks, nor any of your ninety nine pences if you please, which in any case causes a terrible supply problem with the one pence pieces to be given out as change.

I wonder if Maggs is aware of this divergence from company policy?

"But I only want this one."

The woman looks at me as one might at a particularly slow child. "Well, that makes two ninety nine then, doesn't it?"

Lesley takes offence at the condescending tone and at the low-grade rip-off, perhaps brought more easily to the boil by the principle of avarice which has already so ruined her own life chances. "No fuckin' way, Mike. It looks like it's been shit out of an elephant's arse. Don't pay near three quid for that. You must have got loads of books at home anyway."

"I had. Lost them all when the van went up."

"Oh... yea. Sorry."

"But you're right. It's not in good nick. By the way, I believe it would have been more correct to say 'shat', actually. I mean 'shat' out of an elephant's arse."

She reads the playful twinkle and smiles. "Up yours. Dickhead."

I slide the book back in place. "Quite. We'll look out for a better copy."

Still, by now I'm thinking: Vonnegut? What's he trying to say to me?

I thank the good lady for nothing, leave her to her lemons, and we repair to the café next door to sip at sweetly reviving Mochas and lick our wounds... and me to surreptitiously Google 'Vonnegut' while lending only half an ear to our conversation.

I'm bewildered. "Well... that was all a bit weird."

"Tellin' me. An whatcha thank 'er for. Looked at me like dirt and you like you was just plain thick."

"Admittedly she didn't seem over-pleased to see us. Nor was she particularly happy in her work. Lovely old shop though, didn't you think? Maggs has it done out beautifully."

"Stunk more like."

"Yes... old books, I'm afraid. Same the world over. I quite like it, actually. That smell... I think it's magical."

"Suppose you must get used to it then."

"And Maggs isn't there. Obviously."

"Mustn't've left him yet then, you think?"

"I don't know."

"Can't we just go round her house and see?"

"Ooh... not a good idea. None of our business. Anyway I don't know where she lives."

"I do."

"Really?"

"She took me there that night after all that trouble in town – you know, before we drove over to meet you at that cabin in Yorkshire. Remember? I got cleaned up in her bathroom. Nice bathroom too. All white, and pink fluffy towels. Love a bathroom like that... I could just soak in it for hours and hours..."

"Still not a good idea."

"Well, we could 'appen just cruise by, you know? See if her car's there."

"Better not, eh?"

"Up to you," and then: "Seems to me," she muses, "you've not a good track record with women. First Grace, now Maggs. 'Appen I'm next, do you think?"

"What? Disappeared you mean? Yes, I see... a pattern is emerging." It troubles me, the thought Maggs might have disappeared, like Grace. It's all I can do to keep a lid on the panic.

Is she all right? Has he hurt her?

"Maybe I should be careful," she says.

"Oh... I won't let anything bad happen to you. On my life."

"I was just jokin'. I'm not goin' anywhere. But thanks."

"Good... good. You're welcome."

"All right, look... you're driving me nuts. Can't you take your head out of that phone for five minutes?"

"Sorry. I was just reading some Vonnegut quotes. Inviting inspiration. You know?"

"Vonnegut?"

"He wrote that book I was looking at."

"Oh... go on, what does he have to say then?"

"Well, here he says: 'Books are sacred to all free men'."

"Free men who can read, 'appen. So if you can't read, like me I mean, what does that make you? Fucked?"

"Well... more a slave to ignorance, perhaps. Sorry. No offence intended."

"'s'all right."

"Which could be the point, I suppose. The best kind of prison being the kind in which we think we're all free. But we're not."

"Losing me now. All I know is the more I learn the less I like. So... what else does he say?"

"Here's something about the meaning of life."

"Oh... this should be good."

"*The arts are not a way to make a living. They are a very human way of making life more bearable*."

"You mean like painting and drawing and stuff?"

"Exactly. Also writing and poetry."

"Okay I get that... makes life more bearable. I'm with him on that one. Smart fellah."

"And grow some soul."

"He says that too?"

"Grace writes poetry, you know?"

"Wondered how long we'd be before you brought her up."

"I know, sorry."

"Poetry eh? Must be a lot of money in that to live the way she does."

"No, on the contrary, there's no money at all, I mean not in actually *writing* poetry... unless you become some sort of celebrity poet, I suppose, get your face on television and all that."

"Well, she'll not have any trouble getting it published then. Start her own publishing business if she has to, buy her way onto the telly too. Though if she's loads of money in the first place, why would she want to waste her time writing poetry if it isn't worth anything? I don't get it."

"Good point. It isn't that it's not worth anything, only you can't measure it in money terms. I mean even if she did get some tame publisher to publish it, or publish it herself, and some tame experts to sing its praises, other than friends and sycophants, who would buy it?"

"Sicko what?"

"The thing is... Like Vonnegut says, maybe Grace is trying to grow some soul. That's all she wants. Is that it? Is that what this is all about?"

"Dunno, but what you're talkin' about – money can't buy that can it?"

"Damn right it can't."

"I mean, I like the painting. I'm no good at it. Better at drawing. And I remember I always liked doodling and drawing as a kid. It's like you're feeling out the shape of your own insides. Like you're getting to know yourself better."

"Yes, yes. That's it exactly it."

"And inside of me's better than what's outside. What's outside's... kind of... well." she pauses for a moment, seems uncharacteristically maudlin, even brushes away a tear. "I mean like... a bit spoiled innit?"

"Don't go all dark on me, Lesley. That's rubbish and you know it. If our souls are weakened, the world can tear our skin to shreds. True. But what we feel inside is what we eventually become. And if we could all grow some soul the world wouldn't tear at us so much would it?"

"Suppose not. But there's a lot of mean bastards out there, Mike. Bastards with no souls."

"I know... and maybe there's no helping them. But that doesn't mean we can't help ourselves a bit more than we do."

Hell, what am I saying? Putting the world to rights over Mochas with a homeless girl. A girl I'm starting to love with a queer intensity that frightens me. And it frightens me because there's no point in it. But was there ever any point to love? Of course there is. Those you love, you're more likely to want to survive. It's in our interests to love and be loved, otherwise we're all going to hell.

She forces a smile. Brightens, stiffens up and I'm glad because a tearful Lesley is not a phenomenon I'm ready to experience just yet. God help me, I'd want to hug her, but I'd be afraid of her stabbing me.

"So..." she says. "What do we do now then?"

"About Grace? I've no idea."

"About Maggs, you dummy."

"Oh, nothing. She'll be fine. She'll ring me if she needs anything."

"Really? You don't think she'd be too proud?"

"Okay... you're right. She'd definitely be too proud. Drink up. Let's go. But we just cruise past her house, right? See if her car's there. Under no circumstances are we knocking on her door."

"Okay."

She's glad for the distraction, and so am I.

The painting, the drawing... I'd encouraged it as a means of simply giving her something to do other than dwelling on her situation. And now she's dwelling on things anyway, but differently. She's journeying into herself, and that's a trip none of us are equipped to deal with, which I'm beginning the realise is perhaps the whole point of being alive. But could it also be that, having nothing in the first place, it's easier for her to achieve that than it is for Grace, brought up sitting on a massive pile of money?

It takes Lesley a while to get her bearings in Middleton, and all the time Mavis is flashing at me from the dashboard: ABS, ABS,... Avoid Bull Shit.

Are you bull shitting, Mike?

I'd get her fixed but she's starting to make more sense than I do, at least to myself.

Eventually, Lesley's memory hooks onto the shape of a bent sign post.

"Here! Turn in here!"

Then it's a particularly deep pothole, which I have to steer Mavis around for fear of beaching her. A couple of lefts and rights and I'm pulling up on a nice, quiet development, staring at a three bed detached with a brand new resin bonded driveway – which, as everyone knows right now, is the very pinnacle of contemporary suburban chic!

And her car's not there.

It's a decent house. Make no mistake, it's taken some work for her and Martin to get that far. I wonder how on earth I ever thought I could tempt her away from such a place with life in a caravan – the important thing here being I'm thinking it at all, as opposed to thinking she'd ever go for it, if you know what I mean. I mean, it doesn't matter does it? And for all of its modern, middle class respectability, she walked out of that house some mornings with a black eye.

Without a soul, without a measure of kindness, without love, all the money in the world isn't worth a damn. Right? You can see where I'm going with this?

But still, I'm thinking, it's the sort of place she deserves, as much as any of us deserve anything, that all her elegance and poise is wasted on a caravan, even a new one. But, by inference, is a caravan about as much as *I* deserve? And what about Lesley? Is all she deserves from life an empty doorway, a good kicking and a transactional shagging from predatory bastards who value her no more than they would a piece of meat?

Perhaps elegance, perhaps eloquence is repulsive when viewed in the cold hard light of such a reality as that.

And Maggs knows it.

That's why she runs a second hand bookshop. She told me so herself. Because, like Vonnegut says, books are sacred to all free men, and perhaps especially to the men and women who can't afford to buy them any more. And the

libraries are closing because the provincial money vanished into more foetid coffers a decade ago, to sit there doing absolutely nothing. It's left to the likes of me and Maggs to maintain the worthiness of an old book against the odds, and with nothing for our reward but an ability to retain a possibly misplaced sense of our own graces, no matter how ridiculous that seems in the eyes of trolls and the inebriated and all psychopathic bastards who have now arisen to rule the world.

But more than that of course, I'm a man lately fallen back in love with life, and with Maggs.

And I miss her.

A lot.

Chapter Thirty-Eight

I'm dozing, both literally and virtually, a habit to which I am increasingly prone. I have now spent some weeks avoiding the questions: questions regarding the whereabouts of Maggs, the whereabouts of Grace and the purpose of this merry dance she's leading me on, if anything. Grace I mean. I mean, after all, Melvyn could be right – she could just be sick. I've been avoiding thoughts of Manchester too, and this sudden, all too convenient figure of the wise old man, the Senex, in the guise of Christoph Donnegan.

Convenient?

Well yes, for it would suggest my story has lurched into the realms of psycho-babbling self-help now. Who, or what is the Senex? Well, he is said to be one of the last stages in the emotional development of a man, suggestive of wisdom, something magical too. Tolkien's Gandalf is a Senex figure, as is Merlin, a man we mortals turn to for magical solutions to the things that oppress us. And all of it adds weight to the idea some sort of conclusion is looming. But you can tell that for yourself because the pages remaining in my story now aren't that many.

I think I've worked it out, anyway, I mean apart from the details. I just hope I'm not going to disappoint you.

I have been touring the charity shops, building up a small collection of mustily pungent, well thumbed books, and have begun displaying them alphabetically on the bare, sweet smelling shelves of the van. I am still avoiding venturing into Middleton, though I know for certain Donnegans would suit me well enough in this regard, I mean that I know most of the stock there by heart and certain titles have become siren voices luring me to potential doom. But it's too soon for that.

Many of the titles I have now are available as public domain works, free to download to my phone from the Internet Archive. But I prefer a physical copy; networked devices are too distracting, and latterly dangerous. You set out to read a book and the device is flat, or it needs to update itself, or you look up a word online and the next thing you know you're watching Crazy Cat videos, and all the time the adverts are swirling about you like snow, leaving their subliminal imprints in your deepest psyche. And all the while Milord Milner is monitoring your clicks and working out what kind of person you are and how to influence you into doing exactly what he wants. And if

you resist, you'll have a SWAT team breaking down your door because...

They know where you live.

Milner is not a Senex figure.

Milner is Ego.

And the Ego has gone mad.

Milord Milner is Megalomania.

And Maggs is missing, and Grace is trying to escape the life she was born into, and they think she's mad. Christoph Donnegan has answers regarding the latter, while as to the former I dare not imagine the scenarios. And the Milord Milners want me to go to Manchester, which is reason enough still not to go. And the only thing I have that no one else has in all of this is my strange, playful, secret little connection with Grace herself.

I have found another, cleaner copy of Slaughterhouse Five, plus several other works by Vonnegut. I have restocked my Conrad, my Hardy, my miscellaneous poetry, both old and contemporary. It's not that I am likely ever to read these books more than the once I have read at least most of them already. It's just that I like their company.

And, thinking of Maggs, I have even lately acquired a copy of an admittedly rather horny Spankbuster. Perhaps she sees irony in this kind of stuff, I don't know. But in reading it, I feel closer to her, if only by virtue of the fact her eyes have scanned the same lines, her pulse perhaps quickened by the same passages. I remain however, steadfastly, "Joy of Sex" as opposed to tanned bottoms and buggery. The Joy of Sex, I recall, in its later editions, contemporaneous with first awareness of the AIDS pandemic, totally eschews all buggery.

But the thought of being with Maggs and, all right, the thought of making love with her again, well... it haunts me. It moves something in my stomach. I try not to think of her, or *it,* but that's like trying to stop breathing, which is a different genre altogether, and, fear not, I won't be taking you there.

Right now, I'm reading Blake, rather a fragile copy of his poems. It was printed in the middle Victorian period, its paper thick and yellow and mottled mellow now with the passing of centuries, and its this I wake up to, finding it

upon my chest as I lay upon the sofa at the van. It's late, or rather it is small hours early. And Grace is here in the van with me, long chestnut hair, couture blue-jeans and a green chiffon top. And she's waving, trying to get my attention.

What?

I jerk up in shock, as well one might. There is the clickety clicking of an old fashioned typewriter. She's typing, her fingers doing the motions in mid-air.

"Are you there, Rick?" she's typing.

Rick?

Ah... In BFree I am Rick Tuss, remember? And Grace is not Grace. She is Agnetha Godward, and she's not really with me at all, not physically, but seems rather to be staring at me from out of my TV screen. She is in the Temple at Delphi, by the throne of the Oracle, psychotropic vapours rising from beneath. She has modelled an avatar that is as close a copy of herself as is imaginable, her facial texture possibly even taken from a selfie photograph. It is unmistakably and quite shockingly Grace Milner.

I've been in the habit of logging on to BFree of an evening, of steering my avatar into the chamber to wait, thinking that since only Grace has the answers I need, I am better waiting on her than doing anything else for now. In the meantime, I turn myself to other tasks, to reading mostly, to washing, ironing, or cooking supper. And then I fall asleep. I've been doing it for weeks, was losing faith in the idea, even to the point of feigning disinterest... but now...

Here she is.

I make a mad scramble for the keyboard: "Yes. I'm here. Sorry... dozing."

"Thanks for waiting," she types. "Can you turn voice com on?"

Voice Com is a means of direct communication in BFree. You merely speak, and it is as if your avatar is speaking "in world" complete with lip sync. It's really quite spooky and I am generally afraid of it.

But anyway, here goes...

"Hello."

"Hello, Rick. I'm sorry I've not been around. I'm Agnetha, remember?"

Her voice sounds sweet and breathy through the synthesiser, but its generically female, and not her own, though no doubt tweaked to her own honeyed liking. Anyone listening would not know this was Grace Milner, not even her own father, which is the whole point, I presume. And I note how she reminds me not to use her real name. She is incredibly resourceful in her modes of deceit, in her determination to escape.

Surely she deserves to "B" free.

"Nice to meet you at last, Agnetha."

"And you, Rick. Finally."

She's thinking voice is less likely to be recorded by the machinery, less likely than text anyway, that indeed text is most likely to be recorded for all time, and therefore eternally insecure. She intends there being no trace of this encounter. But she is reckoning without the fact that while her real world location may be secret and secure, mine most likely is not, that both our voices may be overheard by Vic and his fellow arseholes, secreted in their bunker behind their razor wire and the patrolling drones of Hammerton House.

We should therefore be very, very careful. We should make it seem as if I am here, a sad, aged geezer making out on BFree, pretending to be twenty five, cybersexing girls. And since they are corrupt, my listeners, it will be easy for them to think it true. But how to let Grace/Agnetha know that?

"Voice may not be totally reliable, however, Agnetha. At least not at my end."

"Oh? You have technical problems?"

"Potential gremlins in the works, I'm afraid."

"I see. How vexing. That's a pity. There's so much I would like to say to you. You've endured so much on my account. Please believe me when I say I never meant for any of that to happen, and how desperately sorry I am."

"No matter, Agnetha. We're here now."

"All right. We'll be brief. Tell me, Rick, do you like my ear rings?"

She's wearing elaborate pearl droppers enmeshed in a sparkling swirl of silver. They are giving off little flecks of light. "Yes, they're very pretty."

"Take a closer look. Zoom in. Do you see all the intricate detailing?"

I zoom in. Left ear. Closer. Closer. There's a four digit number written in black upon the pearl, suffixed E. On the other, another number, suffixed N.

"Do you see it? Both ear rings. Look closely. Make a note of what you see."

"Okay. Yes... exquisite. I see it."

"Good. Thank you Rick... I mean for playing with me. You're very patient. Very kind. I didn't think for a moment I'd bring anyone with me this far. It must all seem a bit melodramatic, and silly."

"On the contrary. It's been fun."

"You must be wondering though."

"Of course. But I understand you're being... careful. After all, no one's who they claim to be in this game are they?"

"True. So..."

"So?"

"So will you dance with me, Rick?"

Dance? "Em... I'd love to."

"Modern or Ballroom?"

"Oh... ballroom I think."

"I know just the place. Follow me?"

She vanishes in a swirl of stars, leaving me temporarily alone. Then a notecard drops into my inbox. It contains a link which I click, and am then transported to an amphitheatre by the sea. The sun is setting, lanterns dot the periphery of the terracotta tiled floor, and a woman in a long dress is waiting. She has changed her hair and her face. As for my own dress, my jumper and jeans are hardly appropriate but a black-tie outfit is available by clicking the formal wear box resting in the shade of a Joshua tree. I assume the position by

clicking the blue pose-ball by which Grace – I mean Agnetha – is standing. She clicks the pink one and we begin to dance to the strains of Barry White.

All right, so it's one a.m., and "fancy stalks outside reason" as Hardy once said. Which novel was that?

The clock struck the solemn hour of one, that hour when fancy stalks outside reason, and malignant possibilities stand rock-firm as facts,...

Ah,... Tess of the D'Urbervilles.

It would be.

That one didn't end well, did it? It wasn't his most calamitous novel. That was probably Jude, at least if we're to go off the body count and the total absence of hope, but all the same my fancy is definitely stalking outside reason here. I really am dancing with Grace Milner, feeling myself twenty five again and in the company of a beautiful woman.

Except I'm not, am I?

It's eerie.

I did warn you about BFree.

I did warn you about stories, about the blurring of identities.

"So, tell me about yourself, Rick. Oooh, nice move by the way. You've done this before?"

"Long time ago."

So...

We talk a while, yes – about me, mostly. As for her own self, she is obviously guarded, so we weave a fantasy around Agnetha's profile – she describes herself as a poet and a traveller, possibly the identity Grace would have chosen for herself, someone quiet, introspective, insightful. So we talk about that, make it real, at least in the moment.

Then, by degrees, she grows quiet, and I do not like to disturb the scene, but simply watch us in the third person for a while. And then she says: "Thank you Rick. You're very sweet. I really am terribly sorry about everything, you know?"

"I know. Please don't worry about any of that. I'm doing just fine. And you, Agnetha? How are you doing?"

"I'm... getting there," she says. Then: "All right, well... see you sometime, I hope," and then she vanishes in a puff of stars, leaving me alone on the dance floor, the sun a golden blaze as it kisses the sea, the sky deepening, the first stars coming out. And if none of this is real, why do I feel it's almost too beautiful for words?

I watch the sun setting for a bit, then click myself back to Pythea's lair, but it's just a plane of grass now, as far as the eye can see. She's deleted everything. And all I have of the evening is my rather smart, though virtual, Tuxedo which I decide to keep anyway. And of course there's also a yellow post it note on which I've jotted down the microscopic numbers patterned on her ear rings.

You might be wondering about those, as I was for time, until I concluded they were an Easting and a Northing, meaning they are coordinates for the British National Grid – a map reference, in other words. I'll look them up tomorrow, peruse the paper maps in the walking shop for a fix. No way am I punching those numbers into a device.

I'm thinking she wants to meet...

Properly this time.

Chapter Thirty-Nine

Grace Milner is worth a hundred million, or so the papers tell me now, and the news feeds. I was supposed to be censoring my inputs, I know, trying to avoid any lingering headlines relating to myself, any lingering abuse I might find hurtful. But I discover my need for any morsel of background information on Grace is more pressing. In short I'm hoping for a few dribs and drabs, whatever has escaped the crushing weight of Milord Milner's embargo.

But his efforts seem only to have had a temporary effect, that indeed I am catching the tail end of a second tsunami concerning the missing Grace. I note I am no longer even a bit player in the drama now depicted, and neither is Melvyn. Whilst I find I am entirely without pique at my sudden demotion, I suspect, however, he is not.

Now the story of Grace is about a missing heiress. Before, it was purely about sex, and the violence men do to women, and I suppose an ordinary girl is good enough for the starring role in such a drama as that. Wealth only confuses matters, suggests a different story altogether, one about money, obviously, and sex, and privilege, and what rich ladies look like undressed. It has moved beyond my class, for how on earth could I ever have plausibly aspired to enter such a world as that?

It's probably not true of course, I mean that she's worth so much in her own right. But if she is, how difficult would it be for her to sequester just a little of it. Even with a cautiously managed investment, such as my own, you might expect a return of 5% these days. Half a million would yield an income of £25,000 a year, which is about average for the ninety nine percent and you can do a lot with it, if you are frugal and unambitious.

You'd still struggle if you were renting somewhere to live, so you'd need another couple of hundred thousand to secure a house, a flat, or something... so long as it was yours. Then you could go to ground in suburbia where no one talks to their neighbours any more, and you could quite easily disappear. Or you could head north, to Scotland where there are still open spaces worth the name, and where properties are cheap, in proportion to the absence of employment. Or you could take to the myriad waterways in a little houseboat.

Of course half a million pounds is as attainable as pixie-dust for most, but to Grace? In her former life she might have spent that in a single weekend. No one in her world would know were she to tuck it away somewhere. It would be like losing small change down the back of the sofa.

Wait... I rather like the sound of the houseboat.

Meanwhile they seek her here, they seek her there. She is dead. She is alive. She is held against her will. There is a ransom of a million. Ten million. A hundred million. Her father won't pay. He has paid. She was spotted in Nice, in Turkey, in Cannes. She has been seen on the deck of an oligarch's yacht moored off the Canaries. She has been enslaved in the Harems of Eastern Kings and Princes, never to be seen again.

Thus do the conspiracies swell and surge.

And all of it is idle speculation.

Entertainment.

Dross.

At least they are not saying she has been murdered now – or more specifically, not murdered by me. So perhaps Seacombe is right, and I am off the hook, if only because attention spans are so short and our appetite for change, for stories is so voracious that the same old thing will never suffice for long.

I wonder if Vic has been fired yet.

None of it mentions the more interesting and important elements of Grace's singular biography: her employment as a teacher of literature, and her sojourn in a Manchester bookshop. There is only talk of her money, of her beauty, and the fact that she is gone. And her picture, bandied so brazenly about the world now, is of a long-haired girl in a bikini, her worth measured by the labels she wears and the size of her bosom.

Same as it ever was.

They seek her here, they seek her there.

And me?

Well... I seek her among the maps in the walking shop, where I am led to the venerable OS sheet for Yorkshire, "South and West", and to an area not quite in the Dales. It's more a hinterland between the north of the county Lancaster and the west of Yorkshire, the roses red and white, bound as timeless lovers by the ubiquitous thread of the Leeds Liverpool canal.

No seriously.

This genius of a canal manages by some tortuous miracle to visit just about every town, village, mine, mill, furnace and foundry in the North country. Including Middleton. And though all of that industry has gone now, the canal remains, to be fished by fishermen, puttered upon by houseboats, some for leisure, some for keeps. In the nineties there was a dip in the population figures of the UK, response to the infamous Poll Tax which saw ten million people disappear from taxable properties altogether. Many of them ended up on the canals, found it a good life and did not return.

When Grace gave her watchers the slip that day in Middleton, did she simply step onto a houseboat and cast off?

For much of its wandering length, the Leeds Liverpool is accompanied by rail and road, but now and then it departs to wend its way alone through hill and dale, its towpath the only means of human access to such regions, besides the water itself. These are pleasant stretches to explore, the inevitably quiet towpath and the blue of the sky reflected in still waters. Such a curious stretch departs the busy ways close by the pretty little village of Thornton in Craven. Skipton isn't far, a major hub for the boated community. But then there's this long, looping stretch away from anywhere, and that's where I am now.

"See you sometime, I hope."

That's what she said.

So I left the van early, left Lesley in charge, left her washing her hair, actually. Alan will be arriving about now. I like the fact the broken parts of themselves align to an approximate fit, that they can sit quiet together and not mind the silence of it.

It was encouraging to see her so nervous. It suggested to me she too has discovered again something worthwhile in life – her drawing and painting, certainly, but more than that, there might also be Alan's strange, trembling devotion – Alan who finds something of infinite value in someone others have treated like dirt. There is just the question of his ailing mother. It will likely kill her if she finds out he is dating a homeless girl, so I trust Alan is not without his own skills in subversion.

It was a stab in the dark, that houseboat thing, and I may be completely wrong, but the map coordinates Grace has given me – if indeed they are map

coordinates – point me to this bit of canal. Thus am I expecting a gaily painted houseboat, moored up, waiting for me, a cosy plume of woodsmoke, the thrumming of an old engine. Perhaps the boat is named: The Oracle of Delphi?

Nice touch, Grace.

But all of that seems an outrageous risk. I mean, I could have been followed and a barge making off at four miles an hour, with Vic Bartlet and company in pursuit, isn't exactly the ideal getaway vehicle. Except, Mavis is miles away now, and my phone is at home. No one can have tracked me here. There's no one else on the towpath in either direction.

No one.

But still. Why would she risk it?

Anyway, there is no houseboat moored in romantic isolation, only a large plastic box at the canal-side, its garish dayglow orange faded back by sunlight to a lesser assault on the senses. It has been raised on a post by the Waterways Authority, and contains only a life-belt, also dire warnings about swimming in the canals.

I walk on, towards Skipton, walk a good mile beyond where the coordinates tell me to be, then I lose heart and walk back. Perhaps I was premature. Perhaps I should have waited for something else from Grace, an email giving a time and a date. I don't know.

Grace, Grace. For pity's sake. What do you want from me?

Back at the life-belt box, I pause, watch ducks take to water. I'm trying to think of anything I might have missed. But it's not as if I've ever been in control, is it? I've merely been led my whole life by one muse or another. By Laura, by Sandra, by Grace, and Maggs...

What about Lesley? No, Lesley's different. Lesley's the person I would have been if I'd been born a girl. It's an eerie feeling and, I admit, a slightly weird thing to say, but given the life chances she's been dealt, I doubt I would have been able to play them any differently. And maybe that's why I love her the way I do, that in loving her I'm in some way restoring the love I need to feel for myself. And in thinking that, I feel a sudden shift in myself, like something long lost bobbing back up to the surface.

The events of one's life are pretty much irrelevant, I mean its ups and

downs, its ins and outs. They're just our story. It's the inner growth, the growth of the soul that's the important thing. And we are nothing if we do not love ourselves.

What do I mean by that?

Well, half my lifetime ago, I couldn't have handled any of this. I would have seen it all merely as the ruin of my life's esteems and sunk myself into an interminable depression, drunk myself to death. Indeed, I had made a substantial opening along that particular path. But actually, you know, by some mysterious process, call it alchemy or magic, whatever you will, I realise now I'm doing okay, and it seems that realisation alone is sufficient to attract other things that are in themselves... well...

Okay.

Okay?

So...

Still basking in the glow of this minor and possibly muddle-headed revelation, I'm about to walk on, walk back to Mavis and drive home, but something catches my eye that I'd missed before. It's a box half tucked away within the life-belt box, a sealed Tupperware carton, in fact, containing books. I take them out, find them all the same, and shiny-new, the glossy covers depicting a cosy, bay-windowed bookshop, like something out of a Dickens novel. It's an Internet imprint, meaning it's self-printed, self-published. The books, eight in all, are titled: "Notes From a Small Bookshop". They are a collection of poems by one Agnetha Godward.

Grace

Damn... she stole my title!

There is also a note, which says: *Mike, please donate to charity. Except the two inscribed.*

The inscribed copies are signed: *Agnetha Godward,* and with love, one to Michael Garatt, and the other to Christoph Donnegan, *for your support, for your faith, and for your trust.*

All of which I find quite flattering, and moving, also puzzling. I suppose she wants me to deliver Chris Donnegan's book by hand.

Grace Milner.

Poor little rich girl. Never a friend, nor a helping hand that does not seek her patronage. But it's better that than being poor, you might say. Or is it? What if all you wanted to do, your whole life, was write poetry?

Seems I've just answered my own question.

By the way, did I mention, tucked inside my copy, and Chris Donnegan's, was a cheque for fifty thousand pounds?

Chapter Forty

So... is that it, you ask. After all of this, all we get by way of explanation are eight little books of self-published poetry no one's ever going to read, and a cheque for fifty grand?

Well partly, yes.

I would have preferred to get the girl.

Maggs, I mean.

We get Lesley, of course, but she's a different kind of girl, and if Alan plays his cards right, she'll be moving on eventually, but not too soon, I hope, and certainly not before his mother passes away. Lesley doesn't know that yet, and I'll have to explain it to her, explain that sometimes, as they say in science, progress is best made one funeral at a time. I trust she won't hold that against him, or me, or drive him too hard.

There's the money, I suppose. That was something, wasn't it? but nowhere near as much of a 'something' as tearing it up. I know... such an outrageous thing to do, but cashing it would have been at the cost of something else worth infinitely more, and which, I suppose, is what this story is all about – I mean about recognising what we all know to be true anyway. But more than that... it's about acting on it for a change.

So...

Manchester today.

Like most cities, there's still a bit of money here. Mostly it's in the hi-rise, in the concrete and the glass, and who owns them. And it's in the noisy engines of the supercars screaming impatience at the more workaday traffic, but all of it nose-to-tail anyway, belching clouds of brick-blackening poison. At street level then, it's just the same old seedy mess: buckled pavements, blobbed with gum, and spun with wind blown detritus, a curious juxtaposition with the twinkling glass and steel all up there, like pie in the sky, apparently defying gravity.

I used to know it well, twenty years ago. In those days the homeless were legion, but largely hidden in the nooks and crannies – the railway arches, the sinister, foul scented ginnels, and the gaps between the dumpsters. They were easier to ignore then, not as

embarrassing to our sensibilities I suppose, I mean that we could apparently serve a system that did this to others, and still sleep at night. But so long as they remained *other* people, that was fine.

They did not even have names.

Still don't.

But now they're impossible to avoid. Now they're bagged up in full view like refuse, waiting for collection-day, or for a cold snap to take them just the same – and all this even in the more prosperous parts of town.

Where am I going with this? Well, we're not quite done, are we? There are still mysteries to solve and all that, so I'm taking you to Donnegans.

It's an anomaly, if ever there was one, Donnegans, I mean by virtue of its survival, and it owes that to the energy of one man, and it's about time we met him, though cautiously, and for obvious reasons.

It isn't in the most salubrious part of town, but an easy enough stride from the Oxford Road station. I've had to stand from Middleton, ankle deep in takeaway trash, a tedious creaking journey of some forty minutes in a decrepit carriage I swear is the same one I used to ride as an apprentice in the seventies. My back is aching now and my humour is dented, but my first sight of Donnegans revives me.

I find it between the anarchic totems of an E-Cig shop and a tattoo parlour. Two doors further down is a promising looking tea shop called The Sooty Kettle. Donnegans itself is a large bay-windowed establishment, not unlike the one depicted on the cover of Agnetha Godward's poetry – Agnetha Godward – the least celebrated poet in the world, except for all the others of course. The interesting thing though is most of those others would give anything for a shot at the money, while Agnetha/Grace has given everything for a shot at nothing. And the thing about shooting at nothing is you can't exactly miss, can you?

It's an interesting idea, and I'm still thinking about it.

But anyway... deep breath... here we go.

The bell tinkles, I step inside and am momentarily paralysed by the scale and the benign quiet of it. This is a seriously stocked bookshop! This is three floors of mouldering, minging, gloriously bewildering old books. They must have everything here!

There's an old guy tidying the shelves, a younger one behind the till, an ill-defined, spotty blob of a youth. He looks up, acknowledges me with a smile, seems suddenly earnest and pleasant in his demeanour. The older one I take to be Donnegan himself. He pauses in his task looks around, peers at me from over the frames of his spectacles.

"Ah... good morning," he says. "Come in... come in... look around. Please ask if you can't find what you're looking for." Plummy voice. Genuine I think. He smiles playfully. "Or if you don't know what you're looking for, ask anyway. I pride myself on always being able to recommend something suitable."

He's probably only a little older than me, actually. Tweedy of course, a wild thatch of unkempt grey, owlish spectacles, paternal smile, a twinkling of good humour. Gay, Maggs once told me. And yes, I can see that in him – at least if the slightly camp, playfulness is anything to go by.

Anyway, he does not look like he would struggle to tie his own shoelaces – I mean as Melvyn described him to me – indeed he strikes me as a very shrewd man, and I'm wondering if this can really be the same person Melvyn described at all.

"Mr. Donnegan? Christoph Donnegan?"

The smile fades at once and he darkens in defence. He is not without his oppressors then, and I've a fair idea who those oppressors are. "It might be," he says. The glasses are snatched away and slid into his top pocket, as if in readiness for a fight.

"Then perhaps I could recommend something for you." I hand him 'Notes From a Small Bookshop' - by Agnetha Godward.

He's curious, takes it cautiously and the spectacles are replaced. He strokes a palm over the smooth glossy cover, opens it to the first page, reads the inscription there, then finds the cheque and his eyebrows rise in tandem, as well they might, as indeed I'm sure mine did too.

"Do I know you?" he asks.

"I don't suppose you do. I'm Mike Garatt. I used to volunteer at your Middleton shop."

No, I don't expect him to know me, but I think he does, perhaps from my brief notoriety in the press – unless Maggs has mentioned me to

him at some point.

Might she have done that?

I wonder.

I look around the shop – all the sections dutifully marked: Biography, Travel, Science Fiction, Art, Literature, Poetry. It's all stunningly well done; Alan would be in his element – a life's work, endlessly sorting and tidying. However, it must also be terribly easy, I imagine, to hide a listening device in a bookshop, to corrupt it into a teller of other kinds of tales. Even an amateur might do it, slip the foul thing behind some books while pretending to browse.

"How I came by the book is rather a long story," I tell him. "And I was wondering, that teashop a couple of doors up the road, is it any good?"

"The Sooty Kettle? Well... yes."

"Then... might I buy you a cup of tea, and tell you that story?"

"Tea? All right. Very kind of you, I'm sure."

I wasn't expecting that – not so easily done. I mean how many strangers come in off the street, slip you a book containing fifty grand, and ask to buy you a cup of tea? You'd demand an explanation there and then, wouldn't you? which means he knows more than I do, obviously. And he also knows more about me in relation to things than I do my self, which is good, of course, and exactly what I'm hoping.

He asks the young man to mind the shop and steps out onto the street with me. I offer him my hand and we shake.

"Forgive me, I know I must sound paranoid, Mr. Donnegan, but do you have a mobile phone on you? and is it switched on?"

He smiles. "No. It's in the shop, snoozing in a Kendal Mint-Cake tin."

"Ah... you find that's... effective?"

"Certainly. A simple, but rather elegant solution to its eavesdropping."

Now you know where I got it from.

He smiles, warms to me I think, and me to him. "Difficult times, Mr Garatt. Your caution is admirable. But we'll be fine to chat privately at the Sooty Kettle. So... shall we?"

Chapter Forty-One

The ceremony of the tea is a precise affair – well, almost – two matching china cups and saucers, willow pattern. The pot is an incongruous brown Wade, hideously ugly. The tea, by mutual agreement, is Assam. It's delivered with a smile by a waitress in black and whites, looking like something from a forties noir movie.

She knows him. No doubt he's a regular.

The precision comes more in the way of words and manners. We have by now discussed the weather, the book trade, the vagaries of the rail system serving the city. We have even touched upon the difficulties of finding adequate volunteers for charity work. But, in the background we have been preparing other words, plotting routes, measuring the degrees of trust or deceit that might be necessary in bringing about a conclusion to this peculiar business – or at least to the satisfaction of our mutual curiosities. More than anything, I want to trust him, and I don't think he's overly suspicious of me either. I already like him... something reassuringly wise beneath the honeyed veneer of his slightly feminine, old world charm.

He has... such a grace about him.

While the tea brews, he opens the book and reads the first poem, his lips mouthing the words, his head nodding out the subtle beat:

In this last settled hour before the dawn,
I dig my heels to slow the flow of time,
And with each measured breath,
Embrace departing ghosts of dreams,
Until at length, and with sad smiles,
They dissolve into the thinning night.
And the sun rises,
Ignites first light of trembling day,
And burns to clear blue,
Somnambulant mists of sleep…

He sets it down, still savouring the words, his eyes far away. I pour tea.

He begins, cautiously: "You've met Agnetha?"

"Yes. A couple of times. But only briefly, in the shop. Like I said, I used to volunteer there. Her leading me to the book, well... that's been a bit of a treasure hunt."

"Ah... she can be playful."

"Indeed. It's a wonder I was able to cotton on to it at all."

He considers this for a moment, swirls his tea thoughtfully, sips, is about to say something, thinks twice, then thinks again, sighs...

"I do know of you, Mr Garatt. I mean... of course I do. I don't wish to give the impression that I don't."

"Ah well... so long as you don't believe all you read in the papers?"

"Not at all. Shall we say the newspapers are not my only source of information? And who buys newspapers these days anyway?"

He's smiling, inviting a confidence, but for now I'm wary of saying too much. It was Maggs then. Maggs has talked to him about me, described me perhaps. But was she laughing while she did so, or was she smiling?

"Actually, it's a great pleasure to meet you," he says.

"Likewise."

"I was deeply troubled of course by the way things seemed to be turning out for you. It was utter madness. My dear fellow, it's all but been the ruin of you... and I'm most terribly, terribly sorry about all of that. Yet... you seem quite sanguine."

"I've gained more than I lost."

Except for Maggs, losing Maggs really hurts. But why does he feel the need to apologise? None of it was his fault.

Was it?

"It's very gracious of you to take it that way," he says. "But your name! Your reputation..."

"People have short memories, Mr. Donnegan. And it's not like I'll ever be

running for public office. Though even there, a little notoriety these days seems to do not harm."

There's definitely something in him, a look of contrition. He direction suddenly, taps the cover of Grace's book. "Were there other copies, do you know?"

"Eight. Numbered. Yours is the first. Mine's the second. The rest she wanted me to distribute by donating to charity shops."

"Yes, of course. Bless her. So... what do you think about that?"

"Giving them away? There's a certain Romance to it. Not a thing easily understood in graceless times, not easy to explain, but I do like the idea. There's something gently subversive about it."

"Yes... I agree. But don't you think with access to such wealth, I mean with all she's allegedly worth – as Grace Milner – she might have used it, used her influence to make a material difference to the world, to the benefit of others? After all who's going to be changed by her poetry – however good or bad it is? What did poetry ever change?"

He already knows the answer. He's just testing me. "I suspect she decided poetry was safer, better, at least for her. This isn't about saving the world, is it? Let others do that. This isn't even about poetry. This is about saving Grace."

He nods. "Exactly. Saving Grace. No more, no less. She used to teach the poets you know?"

"Yes, and that was quite a challenge she set herself, trying to be ordinary, when you're born marked for power and influence."

"Or as mere eye-candy for a powerful man."

"Ah, true. And never a genuine friend, isn't that what they say about millionaires? Even the good ones."

"Sadly, yes. Money makes for poor company. And speaking of money... did she compensate you at all? I mean for your troubles?"

"Same as you."

"Very generous."

"Couldn't accept it."

"Just as I can't, of course." He takes the cheque, tears it in two.

It's not every day you see that. A hundred grand between us? That's a bad night at the casino! I don't doubt there was real money behind the cheque as well, that we might indeed have cashed our chips and run. But present in both our minds was the thought she was testing us, testing the truth of our friendship. Our reliability.

"You think she'll manage it this time?" I ask him. "I know she came to you first."

He nods. "She seems more prepared now. Learned her lessons. I think she'll be all right. She was in a terrible mess, you know? I suggested writing poetry, thinking it would help to pass the time, but it seemed to revive her spirits, which, as you can perhaps imagine, were somewhat flat. Indeed, it became almost her reason for being. As things are now she has her freedom, her serenity, and her poetry. However, if she's found and persuaded back into the fold, I suspect she faces a lifetime of psychoanalysis, and a coerced marriage to some imbecilic prick of a man."

"Ah... you've met Melvyn. He didn't speak well of you either."

He laughs. "Treated me like a senile old fart, so I behaved like one. You know him?"

"When he realised I was involved, he tried to pick my brains. I suspect they wanted me to come here and pick yours, promised me money – and just in case I had my own ideas about that, they hacked my phone."

"Then your paranoia was not misplaced. It's good to see you've chosen your side. And the right one at that, I assure you. Oh... poor Melvyn. He was earnest enough, don't you think? Rather brazen in his ambition of course, and too stupid to realise her father would never have let him marry her, even if Grace had wanted it, which she did not – I mean not when she found out what it was Melvyn really wanted."

"That he wanted in on her way of life, rather than providing much of an escape from it?"

"Well, exactly. They're like the old aristocracy, these newly powerful men,

risen in the space of a single generation. Incredible to think of it. And Melvyn, a man of his middling class and ideas, to say nothing of his relative poverty, he would have been seen off somehow, bought off, or possibly even just frightened off... and some other more eligible man brought in. Secure the wealth, broaden the dynasty... same old story. It's how it worked in olden times. It's how I see it working now, going forward, I'm afraid."

"How long was she with you?"

"A year or so. She'd already tried teaching. Studied, qualified and everything. It was all she wanted, but it proved impossible to walk that path with their eyes on her all the time, and such paranoia regarding possible kidnap and ransom, and perhaps not unfounded given the sorry state of the world. So, the next logical step for her was to run, to disappear, but how does one go about that? Anyway, somehow she managed to give them the slip, albeit briefly, turned up out of the blue here, looking dishevelled and upset, and wanting to volunteer in the shop. Then she rented the flat above and settled in for a while.

"I'd no idea who she was at first. We got to know each other over books, and tea. At this very table, actually. And then I worked it out – intuition, you might say – but was determined to keep the secret, determined to help her stay hidden – in vain as it turned out. I'm afraid she wasn't very skilful in covering her tracks – use of credit cards, drawing cash from the ATM just down the street, that sort of thing, and all quite naive really. It more or less pin-pointed her to those who know about these things, or are wealthy enough to corrupt the ones who do."

"Sounds like you did your best though."

"Oh... I don't know. I had as much to gain from knowing her. I was going through a dark patch myself, you see? Just lost my partner of many years to a distressing and quite brutal illness. I mean I was *depressed*, Mr Garatt. The weight of my country, my world, my entire universe, to say nothing of my own *self* dragging me down the plughole, and nothing but a string of old bookshops to my name, and making virtually nothing for the causes I was supposed to believe in.

"It all seemed, quite frankly, absurd. Until I met her. And then I realised the truth of course. That we don't find our will to go on, our purpose, our meaning, or whatever else you want to call it, in the bigger things, but in the smaller. We find it in the microscopic, in the tilt of a young girl's chin, or in the scent of an old book. That she so desperately sought the ordinariness of the world, the little details of it, all those things I'd lost touch with, but which

were still accessible if only I could find them again... she was a revelation. She gave me back to myself. But tell me Mr Garatt – I don't want to know any details – if you could just let me know, do you believe she's... all right?"

"Oh, absolutely. I do sir, yes."

"I'm so glad to hear it. It's been very much on my mind. I mean, when I heard she'd disappeared again, and then all that fuss around Middleton, like the whole place had gone completely mad, and then the newspapers... hounding you and then Melvyn..."

"Well, my best guess is she's living quietly somewhere, writing poetry which I believe she intends distributing anonymously through the charity shops, and without much of a care for how it's received, or if anyone reads it at all. As stories go that's not a bad one. Something noble in it, spiritual, almost. But more... the book... *that* book... I think it's also her way of letting you know she's okay. The cheque too maybe, but that's none of my business."

"I'm grateful to you, Mr Garatt."

"I just don't know why she didn't post it to you. No one would have been any wiser as to her actual whereabouts. And safer too. I mean I could have been too stupid to find it, or having found it, unwilling to deliver it, or careless in letting someone follow me here. I really don't know why she got me involved at all."

"You must have made an impression, perhaps in some small way, and as we've said, the little things can sometimes outweigh the big ones, the entire world turning on a single glance when an hour's oration will fall on deaf ears. But I share your puzzlement, and can only wonder if she simply wanted us to meet."

"I wondered about that too, and I am very glad to have met you, but to what end, Mr Donnegan? I already work for you, or at least I did. For all she knew I could already have met you, already known you well."

He sits back, folds his hands upon the table, closes his eyes for a moment while he meditates on things and as he does so, I swear, the stillness of the bookshop descends around him, and the noise of the teashop fades to a whisper. "Indeed," he says. "But that would at least explain it, I mean, if she thought we already knew each other... if she already felt you could be trusted. Wouldn't it?"

"But why would she think that. We don't know each other at all."

"Well, no..." He's about to say something else, an admission of something, but darts quickly down another path... again. He's slippery, knows something, but can't bring himself to say it.

"I do hope we can be friends though, Mr Garatt, if only because it seems she wishes it. Beyond that perhaps there is no simple answer. Perhaps it was a combination of many things. First the name: Donnegans, thus memories of the time she spent here, with me. Old books. The scent of them, you know? The sanctuary of them. And you..."

"Me?"

"An older, tweedy man – forgive me – she would find comfort in that, as she did with me. She told me once I reminded her of a teacher she'd had at school, a senior gentleman, a decent sort, whom she'd loved and trusted, and who did not let her down. Tell me have you seen pictures of her father?"

"Her father? No. But, wait... why would she think we already knew each other?"

He ignores the question, proceeds to answer his own: "Middle forties, her father. But dresses like a teenager, and behaves like one by all accounts. Hair around his shoulders, ear rings, tattoos. His current girlfriend is younger, actually than Grace."

"I see." Except I don't, still... "But... you were saying... before?"

"Before? Oh... who knows what she meant by it. Clearly you're looking for answers and who can blame you? But sometimes there are no simple answers. The truth, I find, is more often a direction of many plausible leanings, than a single matter of fact."

The tea is gone. We rotate our cups in their saucers and I sense he's wanting to wind things down. He's being evasive, having laid many trails in the dust, then brushed over them, testing my will to press on, hoping perhaps I'll feel it somehow... impolite.

Why would Grace come to me, thinking I was a trusted friend of his?

Try a different tack, Mike: "Would Maggs by any chance, be your source. Is that how you know my name."

He nods, reflects inwardly, cautiously, testing to see if the ground is safe, or if I have laid a trap for him. "Maggs has mentioned you, of course," he says. "Indeed, she's often spoken about you." He thinks for a moment, wonders how much to tell: "Reliable," he goes on. "That's what she always said about you. And much cleverer than he makes out, Chris. A bit like you, she would say. So... I suppose, all told... more than simply knowing your name, I feel I actually do know you, at least in so far as I do through Maggs. And she's a good judge of character."

An awful thought strikes me: "Then Maggs is in on this too?"

"In on it?"

"The secret, the conspiracy, if I must call it that. I mean... regarding Grace Milner."

"Oh... Lord, no. Maggs knows nothing about Grace Milner... certainly nothing of her time with me." He thinks for a moment, reads perhaps the determination in my tone and definitely doesn't want me thinking ill of Maggs, which is curious in itself.

He capitulates, concedes checkmate: "Oh... very well. I'm so sorry, Mr Garatt. When they came for Grace, all I was able to do was give her a book – a sort of parting gift. I can't even remember the title of it now. I'd only moments to think about it, you see? And in desperation something had me scribbling your name inside of it. Donnegans. Middleton. Mike Garatt."

"Me? But why not Maggs? You know Maggs... you knew you could trust her. Surely you'd think of her first."

"But that's just it, you see – I *know* her. Maggs is a woman, and much as I love her, she would never have responded to Grace in the same way as I'd hoped you might."

"Same way?"

"I mean Romantically. There is something Quixotic in us both, Mr Garatt. Something of the old world. We tilt at windmills, like knights of old. If there was still a fashion for hats we would doff them to ladies, and entirely without irony. But Maggs..." he rolls his eyes for emphasis.

All right, yes… I have to agree with him on that point: there is nothing at all Quixotic about Maggs. But doffing hats? No... I know what he means, and he's right. He's read me right, through Maggs.

"So you wrote my name in a book and gave it to her? *That's it*?"

He sighs. "Put it like that, I mean as blankly as that, you perhaps can understand why I hesitated to come clean with you in the first place. So, you see, it really is all my fault – your misfortunes. Everything. If I'd not done that... but I was looking to protect Grace, and I'd run out of options."

So he seeks what, now? Forgiveness? But that's ridiculous. I'm not sure he's anything to be forgiven for. And for now I'm still interested in answers.

"I told you, Mr Donnegan. I feel I've already gained more than I lost. So don't trouble yourself over it. I mean... really. But… I'm at a loss. How could you possibly think you knew me so well from a few passing comments from Maggs?"

"Oh, believe me, Mr Garatt, it was more than a few passing comments. There were times when her only topic of conversation was Mike Garatt."

"Oh? I've always wondered if she thought me a fool, actually. What would she mean by that?"

"Well," he says. "I always took it to mean she was in love with you. Has been for years."

"She *said* that?"

"Not in so many words, a bit like yourself."

"What?"

"Oh... come now. It's obvious. You've never refused her anything."

"True, but..."

"But nothing. It's obvious."

I thought I'd had him on the run, but now he's coming back at me with something else, has me breathless, sweating. My turn to become evasive. "Is she all right, Mr Donnegan. I mean is she quite... safe?"

"Maggs? Yes, quite safe."

"You're in touch? It's just that, you see... "

"Llandudno."

"What?"

"I've been rather struggling with North Wales, asked Maggs if she'd mind covering there for a while, round us up some reliable volunteers, you know? She's terribly good at that. I have a little holiday cottage out that way. She's staying there."

"So... not the flat above the shop in Clitheroe?"

"Heavens no. Have you seen it? Far too small. Llandudno suits her much better. Trust me."

"It's also a little further out of harm's way."

"Well... she wasn't overly explicit regarding the nature of her troubles, other than to say you definitely weren't the cause of them, that on the contrary you'd been... em... rather supportive. The rest I could guess."

"Then, I'm grateful to you. So... she told me Clitheroe to put me off the scent, stop me calling round, making things... awkward."

He leans back, courts silence once again, smiles. "Have you seen our Llandudno shop? You should have a run over."

"Oh, no… she wouldn't want that. She was very explicit when I last saw her. Buy me lunch Mike, she said, then let me go."

He smiles mysteriously, a playful twinkle in his eyes. "Then it's true what they say about you straight, white males. No offence."

"Non taken. What do they say?"

"That you have great difficulty understanding women."

"Well that's true."

"It does rather make things awkward for her, I mean to suddenly find you in the mix of her life. But you've only to admit your love and things become very simple indeed."

"Admit it to you?"

He rolls his eyes in mock despair.

"No... dear boy. Admit it to *her*!"

Chapter Forty-Two

So... the house went up in the space of a week. It had arrived on the back of a couple of sturdy trucks, along with a van-load of construction guys, all the way from Germany. Then came the crane, and Lesley and I watched in awe as the prefabricated steel and glass sections were assembled onto the repaired and cleared foundations of my Aunt's old house. I'm told it'll survive more of a shaking next time, but I'm hoping the days of earthquakes in Lancashire are now over.

It's a lovely, warm, airy building, filled with light, and all of it very modern of course, though still not over-large – about the size of the building it replaced. It has a south facing balcony, overlooking the moors on which it's very pleasant to take coffee of a morning, and on which I imagine myself reading late into a summer's eve as the stars come out. I can also climb actual stairs to bed, and find I sleep much easier now, and more deeply than I used to do for even that slight gain in altitude.

I dream with a greater richness and colour. And I dream a lot about Maggs. But there's no sense dwelling on any of that.

I've kept a room aside for Lesley, but for now she prefers to sleep in the van, which she has also largely taken over for... I suppose you'd call it a studio, though if I made so bold as that, she'd call me a dick-head. She may change her mind about sleeping in the van come winter again, when I'm cosy and she's not, but then she's no stranger to hardship, and winter, even in a caravan, is positively luxurious compared with wintering on a doorstep.

But the house feels empty without the things to fill it, and I'm too old to start accumulating much now. A huge T.V. for my grainy movies, a laptop and a case of books is hardly going to warm it up much is it? What it needs is someone to share it with. Yes, I know I have Lesley, and I'm grateful for that. But what I mean, I suppose...

Is someone else.

It's over a year since I last saw her, when we parted by the falls at Linton. I've been back a couple of times to that long, narrow span of a bridge, dared myself out to the middle, to the edge and there gazed into the roaring tumult. I've placed my hands upon the soft, green-lichened rail, closed my eyes to the trembling thrill of it, and imagined the warm touch of another hand on top of mine.

How long do you think we'd last?

I don't know, Maggs, but I'd jump if you asked me.

So ask me...

Christoph was right: I don't understand women, I mean any more than the next man – don't understand people at all, really, but that's a cross borne in silence by all us reluctant misanthropes, and it's not for want of trying to the contrary either – I mean trying to work people out. And you can't blame me entirely, because people are complicated creatures, and that's both the glory and the curse of us, isn't it? The best one can do I suppose, is side with those of a good heart and forgive the foibles, including our own.

I do however, understand a promise and, though I have often thought of motoring to Llandudno, imagined the tinkle of that little bell over the door to Donnegan's shop as I walk in, and Maggs seeing me there – the nature of that promise and the gravity of the moment in which it was made have always stayed my hand. It was an important moment for us both, and if all it's to spawn is a memory of poignant longing, then so be it.

Because I have thought about it, and Donnegan was wrong about that one thing you see? I mean wrong about Maggs: she's not the sort of woman a man should chase if she has told him not to, even if her pride would rule out all thought of her chasing him... even if in her heart of hearts, she's perfectly open to the idea. All of which suggests we'll never know, will we?

Such is the background music to my days now. But I was telling you about my house!

Did I abandon my spreadsheet of death, you ask? Did I cash my chips, so to speak, in order to pay for it? No. It was the swine things who paid for it. I took Seacombe's advice and engaged a solicitor whose eyes lit up at the prospect of taking on the fourth estate. I used the law, and the law likes its lists of hurt, and I was persuaded to concoct many!

They settled out of court without much of a fight, and the proceeds bought me the house. Oh, and I got Mavis's ABS light and her rusty back wings fixed up to perfection as well. She looks rather good these days and at this rate will outlast me.

I have returned to volunteering at Donnegans, with occasional days at Clitheroe, and I have had Christoph over a few times now for dinner, since we got the house. Both Lesley and I have taken to him, and he to us. He always

brings a musty old book for me, and asks to see Lesley's latest piece. He is also genuinely encouraging of her efforts, and moved by her talent. In this small respect then she is not without influence as an artist.

He was gracious enough to offer me a paid position, still aching to make reparation for being the inadvertent cause of this whole crazy episode of my life. I suspect he would not be a bad man to work for, though I suspect he can ill afford the wages. But these days I much prefer the freedom to say no, especially on those mornings when the sun shines and Mavis is itching for a dawn run to the Lakes, or the Dales.

I often say 'no'.

Sometimes, Lesley comes along on my jaunts into the hills, and there she storms the high ground like a lioness. Sometimes she waits at home and it's good on those occasions to have her see me back across the threshold with a smile and a cup of tea.

She has such a lovely smile on her these days.

Anyway... lunchtime now and I ask Alan if he's okay minding the shop while I nip out for a bite to eat. Lesley is in the back room, wiping newly donated stock with Mr Sheen, prior to Alan cataloguing and putting it out. I think they are both glad to have me away for a bit, and tell me not to rush back.

It's been a slow morning, rather wet, which always keeps the punters away. We have sold a copy of "Touch not the Cat" (Mary Stewart 1976), and McEwan's "Saturday" (2005) - takings therefore one pound precisely. We have also had a couple of enquiries about jigsaws, strangely enough. We may still be missing a trick there, but I've had enough of puzzles, for a while.

What I most need now is a sense of open water.

It still impresses me how Donnegan tore up that cheque. Fifty thousand would have made a difference to his cause, the equivalent of decades of book-sales on dreary mornings like these. But it was more important for him to prove his loyalty and his friendship, as it was for me of course, though in a much more abstract sense – Grace being still no more than an Avatar in a strange online role-playing game.

And all the money in the world cannot solve any of the truly fundamental problems we face, these being more do with soul, that we are always in danger of losing it, that we will always cash the cheque to our eternal

diminishment rather than honour the soul, and grow as we should.

And speaking of Grace, she's been in touch again.

I won't go into details now as we're so close to the end and I'm mindful I must pick up the pace for you, but suffice it to say we now have another book of poems by Agnetha Godward on the shelf. She calls these Summer Songs, and it seems a pity to let them go for a pound as they're rather fine, and the books are new and beautifully bound. But there we are. They've been there for months actually, untouched. I'd buy them myself but I already have a copy, and these are for flight, not for sentiment.

I keep my fingers crossed for their journey into readership.

Anyway, lunch. I dodge the rain, seek out the little café in the covered bit of the market, where I am greeted by the fag raw voice of the bosomy Maitre D. We have been exchanging small talk of late, she still calls me 'love', which I take to mean she doesn't recognise me from my brief notoriety.

Soup today is Carrot and Coriander. Not my favourite, but I am drawn to it all the same, admittedly by a certain nostalgia for the memory of Maggs' company. It comes with a wholemeal roll, freshly baked and still warm.

Taking my usual seat, I slide the Romney's tin from my pocket, flip the lid and reveal the phone, let it breathe a little, let it catch up with itself and – all right – ping its position to its keepers. I don't mind it knowing my occasional resting places. What I object to is it knowing all my steps in-between, and making blind algorithmic assumptions about them.

For company today, I am reading Dylan Thomas' "Miscellany", which makes a change from scanning it for hidden messages from my muse – my other muse I mean – Grace Milner. Yes, I was born fated to be committing some form of bigamy, albeit these days from afar...

Do not go gentle into that good night!

But then the phone is ringing, and it's more shrill than I remember – perhaps because it hasn't actually rung for a long time – and, *dammit,* now I've spilled soup down my tie!

Maggs...

Oh, wait... are we ready for this?

Well go on,... answer, you fool!

"Em... Hi... Maggs. Lovely to hear from you!"

She sounds frosty: "Mike, will you come in, the shop's a complete mess. Whatever have you been up to?"

What? I don't hear from her for a whole year, and the first thing she has to say to me is about the shop? And it is *not* a mess!

"Em... I'm already there, Maggs."

"No you're not, you've bunked off and you're eating soup."

Wait...

Do I smell Le Jardin?

Coda

All right... I was going to leave it there, but it doesn't quite get to the bottom of everything. So…

Maggs emerges from the market crowds, takes my breath as she sits opposite, lays her phone upon the table, offers a napkin to dab at my tie. She wears a crisp suit, pure sixties beehive up-do... looks fresh, magnificent, rested. The rings have gone. She's smiling.

"Only teasing," she says. "The shop's fine." And then: "You never called. It's been years. I was worried you might have died, actually."

Died? Yes, I suppose I have, in a manner of speaking and am already reborn.

"I'm sure Chris kept you informed. And, it's not been years. A little over a year, that's all, and you wouldn't have thanked me for calling anyway, even if you'd wanted me to." I'm conscious of a tremor in my voice as I speak, take a deep breath to calm it. "You look... stunning by the way."

"Thank you. And you look... older."

"Older?"

"And wiser. But that's what I've always liked about you."

"Oh?"

"You know how to play a long game."

Okay. Pause for thought, now. Her expression demands it. Maggs is being serious and that's a terrifying prospect. Meet her with substance, Mike, not evasion...

"So... how was Llandudno?"

"Bracing over winter, I can tell you. All done now though. The shop's running well."

"Good... and you're living?..."

"Renting. A little place out Marsden way. Sold my Mum's house to the tenant

in the end. I hadn't the heart to move them on. So, time to move on myself, I thought. Derek and I are... separated."

I find myself out of words, suddenly, or rather there's a flood of words all jammed up into silence. She picks up on it, spares my blushes.

"So," she says. "Lesley's doing well. I've just seen her at the shop, couldn't believe the transformation, actually. You've done a good job with her. I feel terribly guilty about all of that. I mean, leaving you with Lesley on your own."

"She just needed a hand getting back on her feet, that's all. She did the rest. And that was thanks to you. I was terrified of her, remember? You got us both back on our feet."

"Don't be silly."

"It's true…" Okay, I can feel the words forming now. Get them in a row, Mike, the right order… "Look, Maggs, there's something I need to say, something I feel I *need* to tell you."

"Don't!"

"Don't?"

"Say anything. About that. I mean for now. Let's just pretend for a little while longer that neither of us is."

"Neither of us?" *Neither of us is what?*

"Neither of us, Mike."

Has Maggs just told me she's in love with me, but without actually telling me?

"So," she says.

"So?"

She's looking a little anxious now, a little unsure of herself, as if her nerve is failing. She's not ordered anything from the counter. Perhaps it's just a passing visit then. Perhaps I should ask her if she'd like something, so I might at least have the pleasure of her company over soup.

Don't disappear, Maggs. Don't leave it hanging like this...

"Listen," she says, "I've taken that cabin in the Dales for a bit."

"Cabin?"

She clarifies: "*Our* Cabin."

"Really?"

"I'm going to take some time out, relax, catch up on my reading, you know?"

"Always good to catch up on one's reading, Maggs. Em... so... what exactly are you reading these days? Not another of those dreadful spankbusters, I hope?"

She laughs, blushes a little."No. Right now I'm reading the Joy of sex."

"Really?"

"You were right, it's rather good."

"Precis it for me. One sentence."

"Oh... let me see. Taken in the right spirit, it can be really fun."

"Ha! Nice one. And true."

"So, I thought it might be... well... *fun*, you know?... if you joined me at the cabin. For a bit. Could you... manage that, do you think?"

"I'm sure I can manage that, yes. "

"Lovely." And then: "I... I heard you'd built your house at last?"

"Yes. Would you like to see it?"

She nods, dives in, steals my bread roll and takes a bite of it.

"Sorry. Starving. I'd like that very much, Mike. Yes."

So, there we are... a better place to leave it. I'll be asking her to move in I suppose, but since we're still pretending we're not even in love, that might be a while off. There's no rush though, is there? Long game, and all that. But for now… Cabin, Maggs, Joy of Sex…

What more could one ask?